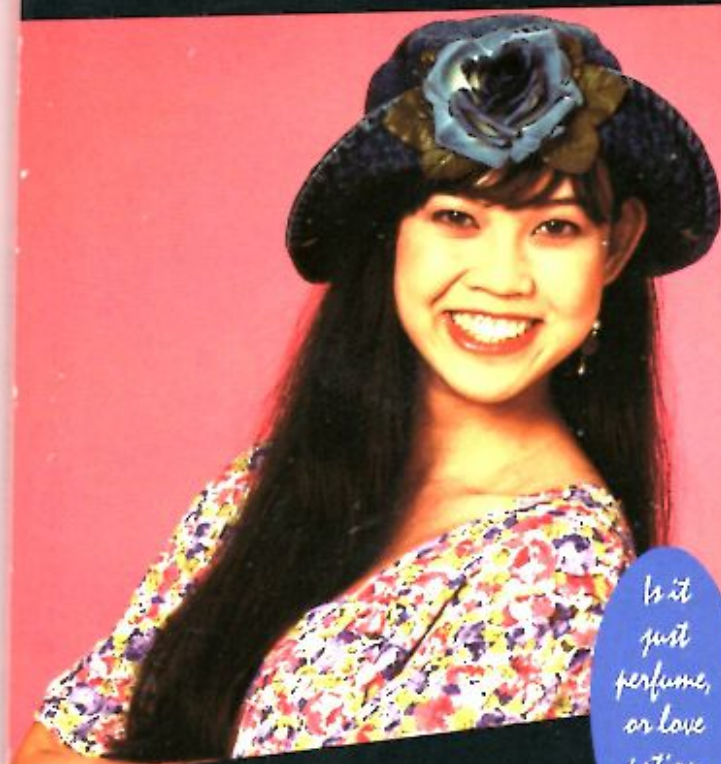


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CALIFORNIA
DREAMS

#8

A California Night's Dream



*Is it
just
perfume,
or love
potion
no. 9?*

by Chelsea Brooks

A *C*alifornia *N*ight's *D*ream



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A *C*alifornia *N*ight's *D*ream

by Chelsea Brooks

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*To all the players
around the world*

Chapter 1

Sly Winkle sauntered down the hallway of Pacific Coast High on his way to his eighth-period math class. There was no hurry. Mr. Kozlowski was always so busy writing equations on the blackboard that he never noticed when Sly came in a few minutes late.

It was Friday afternoon, so Sly should have been in good spirits. But the truth was, Sly was feeling a little blue because he hadn't been out on a date in over three weeks—in his opinion, a tragic waste of male magnificence. Those devastating brown eyes, that adorable cleft in his chin—even that come-hither grin—were being unaccountably ignored by the opposite sex!

True, lately he'd been busier than usual, trying to score a record deal for the band he managed,

California Dreams. He'd been on the track of Lee Ming Sun, a Hong Kong billionaire who had been considering buying Sun Coast Records, a hot independent label. But in the end, even though the billionaire had been impressed with the Dreams, and his son had been very impressed with the Dreams' keyboard player, Samantha Woo, Mr. Lee had decided not to buy Sun Coast Records.

So all the energy and genius Sly'd put into getting the band that contract had been for nothing. Meanwhile, he'd been missing a whole world of babes who were just dying for his company.

Sly surveyed a tall, willowy blond walking down the hall in front of him. He didn't recognize the girl, so when she stopped to tack a poster up on the school's main bulletin board, he went over to say hello. To his surprise, he found himself staring into the big blue eyes of Randi Jo Patton, the student editor of the *Clarion*, PCH's school newspaper. Gorgeous as she was, Randi Jo was already taken. She was the steady girlfriend of Matt Garrison, California Dreams' lead guitar player and chief songwriter.

"Hi, Sly," Randi Jo greeted him cheerfully, flashing him a brilliant smile. "What's up?"

"Oh, this and that," Sly replied noncommittally. "You know, always lots going on."

"Think you might have time to audition for a

part in the school play?" Randi Jo asked, a hint of challenge in her voice.

Sly turned his attention to the poster she was putting up. It read: AUDITIONS FOR SHAKESPEARE'S *A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM* NEXT TUESDAY AND WEDNESDAY AFTER SCHOOL IN THE AUDITORIUM. COPIES OF AUDITION SCENES ARE AVAILABLE AT THE CLARION OFFICE.

Sly gave Randi Jo a sidelong glance. "Shakespeare?" he asked dubiously. "Give me a break. I mean, the guy's been dead for five hundred years!"

"Why, Sly!" Randi Jo remarked coyly. "I'm surprised you've even heard of him."

"Ha, ha, ha," Sly shot back. "Very funny. I happen to be extremely sophisticated and well read."

"Right," Randi Jo said. "I mean, I know you've read the collected works of that famous author Cliff Notes."

"Huh?"

"Never mind, Sly. Anyway, I just thought that with your natural acting ability, you might be great in this play."

"Oh, really?" Sly's interest was suddenly piqued. "Why don't you give me a little summary, in twenty-five words or less, of what this play's about?"

"Well, it's kind of complicated," Randi Jo confessed. "It's about people falling in love with the wrong people."

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"Sort of like life," Sly said.

"Exactly!" Randi Jo agreed. "That's why Shakespeare's so great."

"Yeah, but that weird language he uses . . .," Sly said with a shake of his head.

"You mean English?" Randi Jo asked.

"You may call it that," Sly said, "but it's not the English I know."

"Things change in five hundred years," Randi Jo pointed out. "Anyway, we're doing a modern version of the play, in everyday English. It might not be as poetic as Shakespeare, but at least the surfers in the audience will understand what we're saying."

"Sounds pretty cool," Sly said. "But as for me being in it, I don't think so. I have to admit, though, I'd be perfect as the romantic lead—"

"Actually, I had you in mind for a different kind of role," Randi Jo said. "The character's name is Nick Bottom."

"He's not the romantic lead?" Sly asked.

"Not exactly," Randi Jo said. "He's more like the comic relief."

"Forget it, Randi Jo," Sly said with finality. "I'm not getting onstage just so the whole school can laugh at me!"

"Oh, come on, Sly!" Randi Jo admonished him. "What are you afraid of? Besides, they'll be laughing with you, not at you!"

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"I've heard that before," Sly said, waving her off. "You're not talking to some dweeb here."

"Well," Randi Jo continued, "Nick Bottom does get to have the beautiful fairy queen Titania fall in love with him, and she's one of the lead roles."

Sly raised his eyebrows. "Really?" he asked. Not a bad deal, he had to admit. Glory, fame, the love of a beautiful woman . . . He wondered who would be playing the part. Naturally, she'd fall head over heels for him. Didn't that always happen between costars?

"Of course, it would be a lot of work," Randi Jo said tentatively. "Memorizing your lines, going to rehearsals . . ."

"Work, huh?" Sly repeated, suddenly cautious. "Thanks, but no thanks, Randi Jo. Work and I are not on speaking terms. Not unless it concerns California Dreams, that is."

The bell rang, interrupting their conversation. "Well, I'd better get to math class," Sly said, grabbing any excuse to get out of there. "Mr. Kozlowski's devastated when I'm late. Good luck with your play, Randi Jo. I'm sure you'll find some sucker—I mean, student—to play Nick Bottom."

"Okay, Sly," Randi Jo said. "But let me know if you change your mind. You'd be perfect for the part."

"Right," Sly said. As he walked down the hall, suddenly in a hurry to get to math class, he thought

to himself, *Not a chance. As somebody once said—I can't remember who—"To thine own self be true." And the day I get up and look like an idiot in front of seven hundred people, I cease to be Sly Winkle!*

. . .

Samantha Woo sat in her bedroom, sighing sadly as she looked at a photograph of her boyfriend, Henry Lee. Henry would be going back to Hong Kong the next evening with his billionaire father.

Sam wondered if Henry would wait for her until she went back to Hong Kong at the end of her exchange program. She was supposed to stay with the Garrisons for a year, but her contract was open-ended, so she could remain longer if she chose to.

Sam loved the States, loved being here at the Garrisons', and loved being a part of the Dreams. But with Henry over there and Sam here, she was sure to be feeling very lonely before too long.

A knock on her bedroom door brought her out of her reverie. "Sam? It's me, Matt," came a voice from the other side. "Can I come in?"

"Sure," Sam said, and turned to face Matt as he entered carrying some sheets of paper. Then he shut the door.

Matt Garrison sure is handsome, Samantha thought. And a really nice guy, too. He treated her just like a sister, always making sure she felt at home here in Redondo Beach.

"How's it going?" Matt asked her. "I thought I heard you sighing from out there in the hall."

"Was I that loud?" Sam asked. "Oh, Matt, I can't stand it that Henry's going back to Hong Kong and he's not going to be here, and his dad's not going to buy the record company, and we're not going to get signed to a recording contract, and why couldn't he have stayed? It would have been so cool. . . ."

Matt just smiled at her. "Boy, Sam, you sure can string a bunch of words together," he said with a chuckle.

"Actually," Matt said, "I need you to do me a favor, if you're up for it."

"Sure, Matt," Sam said. "I'm fine, really. Anyhow, anything's better than sitting around moping. And Henry's not leaving till tomorrow. I can be miserable then. In the meantime, how can I help you?"

Matt held up the papers in his hand. "Randi Jo wants me to try out for the school play this year. They're doing Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in modern English."

"Cool!" Sam said, taking the sheets Matt held out to her. "So what's this you're handing me?"

"These are called sides," Matt explained. "They have the dialogue just from the scenes I'll be auditioning."

"So you're actually going to try out?" Sam asked.

"Hey, I have to keep Randi Jo happy," Matt said with a wink.

Sam giggled. She knew that Matt and Randi Jo had had a rocky time for a while there. Randi Jo had gotten upset because Matt had been putting so much energy into California Dreams that he had never seemed to have any left over for her. Matt was trying now to make their relationship better by doing some of the things *she* wanted to do. *Randi Jo's a lucky girl*, Sam thought to herself.

"So would you mind reading this scene with me?" Matt asked. "It'll help me prepare for the audition."

"Okay," Sam said, looking over the script. "Who do I play?"

"You're Hermia and I'm Lysander," Matt explained. "They're in love with each other at this point. Later in the play, he gets zapped with this love potion, falls in love with *her* best friend, and decides he can't stand Hermia anymore."

"Sounds like fun!" Sam responded.

"Maybe you should audition yourself," Matt suggested. "Being in a play might take your mind off Henry. Especially this one—it's pretty hysterical."

"So this is like their big love scene?" Samantha asked.

"Right," Matt replied. "It's going to be a little weird, doing it in the play with some girl I'm not in love with. If I get the part, that is."

"Randi Jo's not playing Hermia?" Sam asked.

"I think she wants to play the fairy queen," Matt said. "That's the best female part, according to her. So I also want to try out for Oberon, the fairy king. But these are the sides Mr. Murphy, the drama teacher, gave me. Anyway, I figure that reading it with you will get me prepared. It's pretty hot stuff, and Randi Jo will be watching me read it at the audition with whoever is trying out. I don't want to mess up because I'm uncomfortable. Know what I mean?"

"Sure," Sam said. "Come on then, let's read. You start."

"Okay." Matt looked down at the paper in his hand and read: "Oh, my love, why are you so pale? Why, like a rose, does the color in your cheeks fade so fast?"

"For lack of water, I guess. Though the tears in my eyes could replenish a dozen roses," Sam read.

"Everything that I've read or heard has taught me that the course of true love never did run smooth," Matt said passionately.

"Wow, Matt, you're really good!" Sam enthused.

"Uh, stick to the part, okay?" Matt suggested. "I need to get a rhythm going, you know?"

"Sorry," Sam said. She continued, "If true lovers have always been so burdened, then that will be our fate, too."

As Sam was saying her lines, she thought she

heard a soft knocking on her door. But she ignored it and went on with the scene. It was probably only Dennis, Matt's little brother. He could wait until they were done. Matt wouldn't want her to stop right in the middle of the scene. He needed to "get a rhythm going," she remembered.

"So let's be patient," she read. "This is as much for us to bear as are our thoughts and dreams and sighs."

"No! If you truly love me, run away with me tomorrow night. Meet me in the woods at the spot where I saw you last week."

"I swear to you, I'll be there."

. . .

"Keep your promise, my love!"

Sly Winkle couldn't believe what he was hearing, so he cracked open the door of Sam's bedroom to listen better.

It was unbelievable! Could this be true? Were Samantha and Matt deeply, secretly in love? Sly had only come by to say hello and to borrow ten bucks from Matt to pay back this guy he'd borrowed ten bucks from last week. Matt hadn't been in his room, though. And then Sly had heard the voices coming from behind Samantha's door.

At first Sly figured it must be Matt consoling Sam. After all, her boyfriend was about to leave the

country. Sam would be feeling kind of down and would need a little cheering up.

But now Sly had caught them in the act. Obviously, Sam *didn't* need any cheering up.

There was no doubt about it. Sam had already forgotten all about Henry Lee, and now she was going out with Matt. What would this mean for the Dreams? And what was Randi Jo going to say when she found out that her boyfriend was in love with another woman?

Chapter 2

Sly sat alone at his favorite table down at Sharkey's, the main hangout for the students of PCH. It was a half an hour later, and he was still reeling from what he'd heard.

Sly didn't know what to do with this bombshell he'd uncovered. If he went and told Randi Jo, it would definitely spell curtains for her and Matt. And Sly wasn't sure he wanted to be responsible for that.

Besides, Matt and Sam were both in the Dreams, and Randi Jo wasn't. So in some sense, Sly guessed, he did owe his first loyalties to the band members. He was, after all, their manager. When he looked at it that way, Sly thought he'd better just keep his mouth shut.

That was okay with Sly, except for the fact that no way could he not talk about this! He would totally

burst at the seams if he had to keep a secret this size for much longer. But who could he tell without it getting around to every last big mouth at school?

Maybe he could tell another member of California Dreams. "That'll have to do, Winkle," he said to himself as he spied Tiffani Smith coming into the place. The Dreams' blond-haired, green-eyed bass player was with her current boyfriend, Jake Summers. Jake was also in the Dreams; he played the guitar alongside Matt.

Sly watched as Tiffani and Jake kissed in the doorway of the restaurant. The two of them had been an item for about a month now, and they actually still *liked* each other!

Sly really admired Jake, with his tough, leather-jacketed style and his definitively cool attitude.

Jake said good-bye to Tiffani at the door and went back outside. Tiffani turned to look for a table, spotted Sly, and came over to sit with him.

"Hi, Sly!" she said, with her usual bubbly energy. "What's up?"

"Ah, nothing much," Sly hedged.

"Too bad about Mr. Lee not buying Sun Coast Records, huh?" Tiffani asked.

"Thank you for reminding me," Sly said with a sigh. "What are you gonna do? These things happen. But why he wanted to buy a cement company instead of a recording label is totally beyond me!"

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"I guess you have to be a businessman to understand that kind of thinking," Tiffani commiserated. "But, hey, there'll be other opportunities."

Sly nodded in agreement. Just then, Tony Wicks, the Dreams' drummer, came up to them wearing the Sharkey's T-shirt that all the employees there wore. Tony worked at Sharkey's part-time, but his real passion was music—especially the Dreams' music.

"Hey, aren't you two with that fresh rock group, California Dreams? Can I have your autographs?" Tony joked, holding out his pad and pencil.

"Ha, ha, Tony," Sly said, with a tight grin. "Look, I'm not in the mood for jokes. I need to think."

"One chocolate shake coming up," Tony said, scribbling it onto his pad. With a look at Tiffani, he added, "Thinking man's drink."

"I guess I'll have one, too," Tiffani said.

"Wish I could have one myself," Tony said, taking down her order. "But Sharkey doesn't like the help to help themselves, know what I mean? Hey, by the way, Sylvester, now that your big deal fell through, when are you going to get us another gig?"

"Give me a little time, Tony," Sly assured him. "I've got a lot of things in the works. Trust me, okay?"

"That's what the dentist says before he drills a hole in your mouth," Tony commented. "Hey, take

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your time getting us a gig, Sly. But don't take too long. I'll be collecting Social Security soon."

After Tony went off to make their shakes, Tiffani asked, "Where were we, Sly?"

Sly watched Tony's retreating back. "You mean before we were so rudely interrupted? I think we were talking about Mr. Lee not buying Sun Coast Records."

"Oh yeah," Tiffani said, her smile vanishing. "You know who I feel really bad for, though? Samantha. She's sure going to miss Henry when he goes home tomorrow night."

Sly gave a derisive snort. "Oh, don't feel too sorry for Sam," he told Tiffani. "Something tells me she can take care of herself."

"Sly!" Tiffani gasped. "What an awful thing to say! I mean, her boyfriend's leaving her, and who knows when—or even if—she'll ever see him again!"

Sly rolled his eyes. "If you knew what I know, Tiff, you would understand."

Tiffani gave him a stern look. "Why don't you tell me what you know, then?" she demanded.

"Okay," Sly said quickly. "You twisted my arm, so here it is. You can't say I didn't warn you."

"Sly . . ."

"Okay, okay. I was over at the Garrisons' a little while ago. I just stopped by to see how Sam was feeling and ask a little favor of Matt. So, anyway, I

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hear voices coming from behind Sam's bedroom door."

"Yeesss?" Tiffani prompted him.

"I knock, but nobody answers, right?" Sly went on. "So I open the door just a little bit, and what do I hear?" He paused for a moment, waiting for Tiffani's reaction.

"I give up," Tiffani said. "What?"

"Sam and Matt, confessing their love for each other!" Sly finished with a flourish.

Tiffani screwed up her face in confusion for a long moment. "You're making this up, right?" she finally said.

"No way," Sly said, his face the picture of sincerity.

"I don't believe you."

"Believe me."

"But, Sly, that's impossible! Matt's in love with Randi Jo!"

"That's what I thought, too," Sly agreed. "And that's the way I want it to stay. I mean, how many great love songs has Matt written for Randi Jo? Four? Five?"

"A lot," Tiffani concurred.

"Right. But if he dumps her for Samantha, that'll be the end of that," Sly said with finality. "Besides, I don't think it's good for members of the band to date each other."

Tiffani gave him a long look.

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"Except for you and Jake, that is," Sly added hurriedly, taking his big foot out of his mouth.

"I'm sorry, Sly," Tiffani said, shaking her head again. "This is just too incredible to be believed. I mean, Matt is not that kind of guy."

"I'm telling you, Tiff," Sly insisted. "I heard them talking to each other, calling each other darling and my love and stuff."

"Get out of here!"

"I swear!" Sly said, his hand covering his heart. "You've got to help me out, Tiffani. I don't know what to do."

"Sly," Tiffani told him, as Tony returned with their shakes and left again. "Listen to me. If Matt and Sam have really fallen in love, which I refuse to believe for one second, then that's their business. People have a right to follow their hearts without anyone else butting in."

Sly took a sip of his chocolate shake. Tiffani was going to be no help, he could see that now.

What had made him think she would have any ideas, if a genius like him didn't even know how to handle the situation?

And, anyhow, Sly had a better plan now. He was going to talk about this with someone who could do something about it. He was going to talk to his old buddy, Matt Garrison, himself.

...

California Dreams

*"You are my new love,
I didn't see it coming.
You took me by total surprise. . . ."*

Sly stood in the open garage doorway, watching Matt sing at the keyboard, his eyes closed, a pair of headphones covering his ears. Sly went over and tapped his friend on the shoulder.

"Sly!" Matt said, opening his eyes and stopping in mid-song. "I didn't hear you come in." He pulled the headphones down around his neck.

"I know," Sly said. "That's been happening a lot lately."

"What's up, buddy? Tough luck about Sun Coast."

"Why does everybody keep mentioning that?" Sly asked himself out loud.

"Sorry," Matt said. "What can I do for you?"

"First of all, I need to borrow ten dollars," Sly said boldly. "Put it on my tab, okay?" he asked, as Matt fished out his wallet and handed Sly the ten.

"I already have," Matt said with a wry smile. "You owe me forty-five dollars, and that's as much as you're going to owe me. You know, Sly, maybe you should get a job if you need so much money."

"Me?" Sly asked, astonished. "Get a job? But, Matthew, I already have a job as manager of the Dreams! Or haven't you noticed? True, there's no up-front money in it, but when we hit it big, which I

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have total faith we will do, I get ten percent. I'll be able to pay you back double then!"

"Sure, Sly," Matt said with a laugh. "Let me know when our next gig is, okay? In the meantime, listen to this new song I just wrote. I think it's pretty good."

"The one you were singing when I came in?" Sly asked. "About your 'new love'?"

"Yeah, that's it," Matt said, nodding.

"I'll, uh, hear it another time," Sly said quickly, taking a seat next to Matt. "Listen, dude, you and I have got to have a little talk—man to man."

"Uh-oh," Matt said. "Sounds serious."

"I think you could put it that way," Sly said. "So I'm just going to be straight with you about it, okay?"

"Sure thing," Matt said. "Shoot."

Sly opened up his mouth to speak, but suddenly the words froze on his tongue. "It's, ah, about, ah . . . Matt, sometimes, a moment comes when, ah . . ."

"You sound like my dad when he told me about the birds and the bees," Matt said with a laugh.

"Come on, Sly, just tell me."

"Matt—how do you feel about Samantha?" Sly spat out.

"Sam? She's great. Why?"

"I mean," Sly said, "do you think she's, um, oh, I don't know . . . good-looking?"

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Matt grinned. "She's a babe," he said forthrightly. "Cute, pretty, what do you want me to say?"

"What do I want you to say?" Sly repeated. "I don't know, but that wasn't it."

"Oh," Matt said, his brow furrowing. "How about smart, fun, good sense of humor, lots of charm, easy to be with, talented. . . . It's sad that Henry Lee's going back to Hong Kong, but if you're worried about Sam, don't be. I'm sure she'll find another guy as soon as she's ready. I don't know if you've noticed, but she's been looking really great lately." He looked up at Sly. "How's that for an answer? Am I getting warmer?"

"Too warm," Sly replied, starting to feel distinctly warm himself.

"What's the matter, Sly?" Matt asked. "Why are you asking me all these questions about Sam?"

"You're right!" Sly agreed. "Why am I asking about Sam? Who wants to talk about Sam? Tell me, Matt—how do you feel about, oh, say, Randi Jo?"

"I love her," Matt responded with a shrug. "Does that answer your question?"

"Uhhhh . . . well . . ."

"Sly, what's going on?" Matt demanded. "If there's something on your mind, just spit it out, okay? Whatever it is, you can say it."

"Uh-huh," Sly said, barely able to think. His palms were sweating, for goodness' sake! What was wrong with him? Didn't he have the nerve to accuse

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his best friend to his face of two-timing his girlfriend?

No. He definitely did not. Sly gave Matt a long look as he stepped out of the garage.

"Yeah, Matt," Sly said. "But let's talk about it another time, okay? I've gotta go now. See you later."

Sly jogged to his car and took off. In his rearview mirror, he could see Matt in the garage doorway, watching him.

"I thought I knew you, Matt," Sly said under his breath. "But there's more to you than meets the eye, you dog."

Having heard Matt's comments about Sam, Sly was surer than ever: Matt was in love with her, and Randi Jo was about to get the shock of her life!

Chapter 3

"I'm really going to miss you, Henry." Sam stood in the lounge at L.A. International Airport on Saturday evening, her arms around Henry Lee as they said good-bye after a long and wonderful last day together.

"I'll miss you, too, Sam," Henry told her. "I had a great time in California, and it's all because of you."

"Oh, why do you have to go?" Sam asked. "Can't you just talk your father into letting you stay for a while?"

"Without him here?" Henry asked with a laugh. "No way! My dad's very strict. I don't know if you noticed." In response to Sam's worried look, he added, "Oh, don't worry. He approves of you. It isn't that. It's just that he likes to keep an eye on me."

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"Will you write to me?" Sam asked sadly.

"Of course I will!" Henry told her. "Although I have to admit, I'm not much of a writer. Maybe I could sing some songs on a tape and send them to you!"

Sam couldn't help wincing. Henry's voice sounded like gears grinding. "You don't have to do that, Henry," Sam said quickly. "A letter is so nice to get. . . ."

"Okay, okay," Henry said, laughing. "And I promise to take voice lessons, like you told me. Oh, by the way, Sam, I got you something, a little present." He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a small, gift-wrapped package. "Open it. We still have a couple of minutes."

Sam fumbled with the ribbon and tore open the paper. Inside the box was a cut-glass bottle with a label that read LOVE POTION NUMBER NINE.

Sam could tell by the beautiful bottle and the box that the perfume had to have been incredibly expensive. "Oh, Henry, you didn't have to do this," Sam gasped. "You're so sweet!"

"Put some on," Henry told her. "I want to smell it on you before I go."

"Okay," Sam said, sprinkling a little behind each ear.

Henry nuzzled her and sniffed. "It's true," he murmured, kissing her lightly on the neck as he ran his hands through her shiny black hair. "They weren't lying."

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"Who wasn't lying?" Sam asked, curious.

Henry took the bottle from her and read from the little booklet that was tied to it with a piece of string. "This is Love Potion Number Nine," he read. "Congratulations on your good taste in acquiring this rare and mystical potion. It is uniquely suited for use by either men or women. Be warned, though. The wearer becomes instantly irresistible to the opposite sex."

"Wow!" Sam said. "Henry, aren't you afraid I'll use this stuff while you're gone?"

"Uh-oh," said Henry. "Maybe you're right. I don't want hundreds of guys falling in love with you while I'm not around. Okay, give it back. You convinced me."

"Never mind," said Sam, holding tightly onto the bottle. "It's mine now, and don't you worry about guys falling for me. I'll see you at home in Hong Kong—unless you decide to come back here and visit me first."

"I might just do that," Henry said quietly, his smile vanishing as he drew Sam to him for a long good-bye kiss. When they finally broke apart, he said, "I'd better go. My dad's waiting for me. Don't forget about me, Sam."

"I won't!"

"And I'll call you whenever I can," he said. He blew her a kiss before turning to go to his plane.

Watching him leave, Sam felt a tear running

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down her cheek. Henry was so wonderful. She hoped he would still feel the same way about her a year or two from now when she returned home.

If he did forget about her, at least she would still have some beautiful memories. And perhaps this bottle of "irresistible" perfume could help her find somebody else.

. . .

On Sunday morning, Sam was feeling sad. It didn't help that the entire Garrison family was being so nice to her. Not that they weren't good to her all the time. But they were going out of their way today to make sure she had every little thing she wanted. They were being so sweet, it was totally unbearable.

Finally, she just had to get out. She asked Mr. Garrison if she could borrow the keys to his old car, and of course he said yes. He always did. And he even insisted on vacuuming the front seat before she took off.

Sam drove out of there at last, heaving a sigh of relief. She needed to be alone. Not that she meant to be down forever; she just needed a little time to miss Henry before she could get over him.

She parked along the beach and just started walking until she found a secluded spot. Sam sat there, watching the sun bounce off the waves and the surfers gliding in.

It seemed as though she'd been there for hours when she felt a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Sam?"

Sam jumped slightly, surprised by the unexpected intrusion. She turned to see who it was.

"Randi Jo!" she exclaimed. "Hi!"

"Are you okay?" Randi Jo asked. "You looked kind of down. I wasn't sure if you wanted company."

"Of course, sit down," Sam said, patting the sand next to her. "Actually, I *was* feeling a little depressed. Henry went back to Hong Kong last night."

"Oh, no!" Randi Jo moaned. "That's awful!"

"I know. I really liked him a lot," Sam told her. "But, hey, I guess I'll live. I've got great friends, I've got the Dreams, and there are other guys, right?"

"Right!" Randi Jo agreed. "There you go."

"Right," Sam said, her shoulders slumping. "I just don't feel like going out with any of them. Not after Henry."

"I felt that way when Matt and I broke up a few months ago," Randi Jo confessed. "But I just forced myself to go out and meet people. And in the end..."

"In the end, you wound up with Matt again," Sam finished for her.

"Oh. Yeah, I guess I did," Randi Jo said. "Well, how about this, then? Why don't you keep yourself busy, so you don't have that much time to think about how miserable you are?"

Sam shook her head. "Do you really think that'll help?" she asked.

"I don't know," Randi Jo confessed. "But I do need people to audition for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It might be fun for you. Want to give it a try?"

"I've never really been in a play before," Sam said tentatively.

"Do you think most of the people auditioning have any more experience than you do?" Randi Jo asked. "They don't! Besides, I know you have stage presence from watching you play with the Dreams. You could probably do any of these roles with no problem!"

"Do you really think so?" Sam asked.

"Of course," Randi Jo said. "Why don't you stop by the *Clarion* office tomorrow and pick up the audition scenes for the female characters? These are called sides."

"Oh, right!" Sam said, remembering how much fun she'd had reading with Matt the other day. "Is Matt going to be in it?"

"That depends on how well he auditions. Mr. Murphy has the final decision," Randi Jo said. "You might be good as *Hermia*. She's the romantic leading lady. Two guys are in love with her."

"Hmm," Sam said, remembering that she had heard that name before. "Oh, wow. I read a scene with Matt that had her in it!"

California Dreams

"Great!" Randi Jo said. "Then you're already familiar with the character."

"Oh, Randi Jo," Sam said, suddenly feeling unsure. "I don't know about this. . . ."

"Sam, you don't have to take the part," Randi Jo pointed out. "Just try out and see how you like it."

"Oh, okay. Why not?" Sam said. "You really think acting in a play will take my mind off Henry?"

"Sure!" Randi Jo said enthusiastically. "Sam, believe me, once you get started memorizing all those lines, you won't have time to think about *anything* else!"

Randi Jo got up to go. "Auditions are Tuesday and Wednesday. You don't have to memorize anything for them, though. We'll just be reading from sides."

"Okay. I'll be ready."

"You're going to be great, Sam. I can feel it!" Randi Jo said, and went off down the beach.

Sam sat staring at the ocean. It wasn't exactly like having Henry around, but what harm could it possibly do to audition for a play?

. . .

That evening, Sam went looking for Matt to ask him to read the scene with her again, but Matt was busy out in the garage writing a song for the Dreams. Sam decided not to disturb him. She did, however, find his sides on the living room coffee table. She figured

A California Night's Dream

he wouldn't mind if she borrowed them for a little while. Then they could run lines together in the library tomorrow, during their free period.

But on Monday afternoon, when their free period came, Matt was nowhere to be found. *Where could he be?* Sam wondered. Maybe he was up at the *Clarion* office hanging out with Randi Jo. Sam decided to find out. She grabbed her books and headed out of the library and up the stairs to the third floor.

To her surprise, the *Clarion* office door was locked and all the lights were off inside. Luckily, she had thought to make a copy of Matt's sides so at least she could practice alone if she had to. But as a last effort, she decided to check down in the music practice rooms. Sometimes Matt went there to write songs. She ran down the stairs to see.

On her way, she heard familiar voices coming up the stairs toward her.

"I'm telling you, man, if I don't ace the history exam, I'm going to *be* history!" Definitely Tony, Sam thought with a smile.

"Come on, Wicks," said the other voice—Jake's. "Don't exaggerate. The worst that will happen is you'll flunk history, get left back, and never make anything out of your life."

"Hi, you guys!" Sam said as they rounded the corner of the stairs and came into view.

"Hey, Sam!" Tony said. "How're you doing? Henry get off to Hong Kong okay?"

California Dreams

Jake jabbed Tony in the ribs with his elbow. "Tact, Wicks. Ever hear of it?"

"Yeah, man," Tony said, rubbing his side and wincing. "Just the other day at practice."

"You seem pretty good," Jake told Sam. "Holding up okay?"

"Yeah, I guess," Sam said. "Randi Jo wants me to audition for the school play. She thinks it'll be just the thing to get my mind off Henry."

"Maybe so," Jake said, nodding his head thoughtfully.

"In fact," Sam went on, "I was just looking for Matt. I thought he could help me read over my part for the audition."

"Matt went home early," Tony told her. "He ate some of that chipped beef in the cafeteria. Big mistake. I told him not to."

"Wicks," Jake said, cutting him off. "Enough, okay? I ate the chipped beef, too, and I'm feeling fine."

"You sure, dude?" Tony asked.

"Yeah, I'm sure," Jake said, shaking his head and smiling. "I think."

"Well, maybe one of you two guys can help me out," Sam offered. "Tony? Want to come read my scene with me?"

"Who, me?" Tony replied, pointing to himself.

"Sure!" Sam said. "Come on—it's a love scene."

A California Night's Dream

"A love scene with you, baby?" Tony asked. "Mmm, I don't know. You think you can resist the master of romance?"

"No problem," Sam said, laughing and rolling her eyes.

"What's the play?" Jake asked.

"Jake, where have you been?" Sam asked, surprised. "Haven't you seen the posters plastered all over the school?"

"Um, I guess I never really pay attention to that kind of stuff," Jake confessed.

"It's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by Shakespeare," Sam informed him.

"Shakespeare?" Tony interjected, a distinct look of distaste coming over his face. "Uh-uh. Count me out. I don't do fluffy stuff, know what I mean? I've got a reputation to protect."

"Oh, come on, Tony!" Sam retorted. "There's nothing fluffy about Shakespeare. Haven't you ever read any of his plays?"

"Me?" Tony replied. "Uh-uh. It's like I said—"

"Wicks, don't be a dweeb," Jake broke in. "The lady is asking you to do her a favor. Are you gonna refuse her just because you're scared of what people will think?"

"Uh-huh," Tony shot back. "You got it, dude. You don't care what people think—you read it with her yourself!"

"That's a great idea!" Sam said excitedly. "Will you, Jake?"

Jake looked like he'd been hit with a ton of bricks. "Who, me? Uhhh . . ."

"Oh, come on," Sam urged him. "You'd be great as Lysander."

"Sure you would!" Tony agreed, slapping Jake on the back. "Go on, hero. The lady's asking you for a favor!"

Jake shot a look at Tony that spelled painful death. Then he turned to Sam and said, "Okay. Just to prove to Wicks here that I don't care what anybody thinks."

He grabbed the side Sam was holding out to him and said, "And, Wicks, if you blab about this to a single solitary soul, you're going to be eating chipped beef until you turn into a chip yourself. Get me?"

"My lips are sealed, Fluffy," Tony said, unable to suppress his laughter.

"Come on, Sam," Jake said gruffly. "Where do you want to go to read this?"

Sam took him downstairs to the practice rooms, which were laid out along both sides of a long hallway in the basement. The rooms each had a piano in them and were almost totally soundproof. Sam found an empty one and led Jake inside, closing the door behind him.

"There," she said. "No one will hear us, so there's nothing to worry about, okay?"

"Hey, I'm not worried," Jake insisted. "Like I said, I don't care what anybody thinks."

"Sure you don't," Sam said with a giggle. "Shall we start? You've got the first line . . ."

. . .

Sly hadn't been able to get a decent night's sleep since he'd caught Samantha and Matt together last Friday. Here he sat in biology class on Monday afternoon, still thinking about the situation while Ms. McAllister droned on about the mating habits of the black widow spider. Sly knew a moment would come when she'd call on him, and he'd make a total fool of himself in front of the entire class.

So he did the only thing he could do to avoid public humiliation. He raised his hand and asked to go to the bathroom.

Slinking down the hallway, Sly tried to figure out what to do next. He'd already tried talking to Tiffani and that hadn't done any good. And he hadn't been able to bring it up with Matt directly. Sly knew it wouldn't have helped, anyway. Matt would have just denied anything had happened, or he would have offered some lame excuse. What else could he have done? He would have never admitted it.

Sly had thought of telling Tony or Jake. But

California Dreams

why would they have believed him when Tiffani hadn't?

No, there was only one person to see. The person who was at the bottom of this whole mess. The person who was doing her best to break up a perfectly good relationship, which had resulted in some perfectly great songs. *Samantha*.

Now where would she be at one forty-five? Her free period, he remembered. She'd probably be at the library studying. But when he peeked through the doors, she wasn't there. She must have gone off somewhere, Sly reasoned. But where?

Well, where did *he* go when he wanted some peace and quiet? To the basement! At least once a week, Sly would camp out in one of the music practice rooms and put on a cassette tape so it sounded like he was busy analyzing something classical. Then he would spend his time with cotton in his ears, reading *Music Express* magazine or some book about how to succeed in business.

He walked down the long hallway, looking through the little windows in the practice room doors. Finally, Sly recognized the back of Samantha's head. He knew it was her from the long, silky hair. Then he noticed a second head—*aha!* he thought. She had snuck out to secretly meet Matt!

But the other head wasn't Matt's, Sly soon realized as he took a second look. It was Jake

A California Night's Dream

Summers's! Sly could just barely make out what they were saying.

"Oh, my dear," he heard Jake say. "Our hearts are knit together like one. We are two people made into one. Of course I will do whatever you wish. . . ."

Oh, no! Sly swallowed hard. *Could it be?*

"The day I stop loving you is the day I die,"

Sam replied.

Sly couldn't believe his ears—Sam was not only stealing Matt from Randi Jo, she was stealing *Jake* from *Tiffani*!

Chapter 4

Sly got out of there in a hurry, jogging down the long hallway until he got to the stairway door at the end of it. He pushed through and hurled himself right into Tiffani, who was just coming downstairs. He hit her so hard that he nearly knocked her over.

"Sly!" Tiffani cried, grabbing the banister for balance. "Watch where you're going!"

"Sorry, Tiff," Sly said urgently, "but you're not going to believe what I just heard."

"I'm not?"

"Definitely not. In fact, maybe I shouldn't even mention it."

"No, that's okay, you *should* mention it."

"I don't think so."

"I do," Tiffani insisted. "Come on, Sly. What did you hear?"

A California Night's Dream

"Okay, okay. I'm going to be sorry for this, I can just tell. Jake's going to break my jaw."

"Sly! Will you please tell me before I slug you?" Tiffani demanded.

"Okay. Jake's in love with Samantha," Sly blurted out.

"What?" Tiffani gasped. "Oh, come on, Sly. Just the other day you said Matt was in love with her!"

"He was—he is!" Sly said, nodding his head. "Tiffani, I know this is hard to believe, but for some reason—maybe she's overreacting to Henry leaving, I don't know—Sam is going after every guy around . . . except me. Anyway, she's going after them and *getting* them!"

"Sly," Tiffani said, looking at him like he was from Mars, "maybe you should see a doctor. You're not a well person."

"Don't give me that candy-striper stuff!" Sly shot back. "I know what I saw and what I heard!"

"Of course you do," Tiffani said sympathetically. "How long have you been having these hallucinations?"

"Will you stop it? Fine, don't believe me. You'll find out the truth soon enough. And when you do, you'll remember where you heard it first."

"I certainly will." Tiffani was still giving him that irritating look of pity and concern. "Bye, Sly."

Tiffani put her hand out to open the stair door,

but just then, Jake banged through it on his way upstairs.

"Oh! Hi, Tiffani," he said, giving her a quick smile and a peck on the cheek. "What are you doing here?"

"Look, he's blushing!" Sly said to Tiffani. "What did I tell you?"

"Shut up, Twinkle," Jake told him. "I don't blush."

"How's Sam?" Sly asked Jake, giving Tiffani a sidelong glance. "Run into her lately?"

Jake gave Sly a long, suspicious stare. "I haven't seen her all day," he said slowly. "I've gotta go. Bye, Tiff. See you at practice." He gave her another smile before he headed upstairs.

"See?" Sly said urgently. "See what I told you? He's got a guilty conscience!"

"I didn't see anything of the kind," Tiffani retorted. "He was just surprised to run into us like that."

"Why?" Sly insisted. "Oh, never mind. Forget I said a word. 'None so blind as those who will not see . . .'" he quoted as he climbed the stairs. "Give my regards to Sam, Tiffani. She's in the last practice room on the left. Ask her if she's seen Jake."

Sly made it back to class just as the bell sounded for the end of the period. "Nice to see you again, Mr. Winkle," Ms. McAllister said sarcastically.

"Nice to see you, too," Sly replied, smiling weakly as he gathered up his books to leave.

Things were not going well, he reflected. Not well at all. He was going to have to talk to Sam in private—and soon. Nobody else but Sly could put an end to this craziness!

. . .

Samantha peeked through the window of the *Clarion* office door a few minutes later. There was Randi Jo sitting at her computer, working on a story.

Sam opened the door and entered the office, which was a beehive of quiet activity as the various editors worked on this week's edition.

"Hi, Randi Jo," Sam said, coming up to her desk. "I hope I'm not interrupting you at a bad time."

"Not at all, Sam," Randi Jo assured her, saving her work on the computer and swiveling in her chair to face Sam. "Did you come to pick up the sides for the part of *Hermia*?"

"The sides? Oh, no. I copied Matt's and have already read them over," Sam told her.

"Great! So what do you think? Are you going to audition?" Randi Jo looked up at her with expectant eyes.

Sam hated to disappoint her. "Actually, Randi Jo," she said haltingly, "I do think it would be fun to be in the play—"

"Fantastic!" Randi Jo exclaimed. "I knew you'd want to do it. Sam, it's going to be a real hoot, you'll see!"

"Wait, Randi Jo," Sam continued. "I didn't finish. I would like to do it, but I don't want to play a romantic part. The whole time I was reading the scene, it made me think of Henry leaving and I just wanted to cry."

"Oh. Oops," Randi Jo said, biting her lip. "I guess I didn't think of that. But hang on a minute, Sam. What about reading for a different kind of part?"

"Like what?" Sam asked. "A guy?"

"No, of course not. But there is a part you'd be great for," Randi Jo said.

"Which one?"

"Puck!"

"Puck? Who's she?" Sam asked.

"Puck's not a she, actually," Randi Jo confessed. "Puck's an it, to be exact. A hobgoblin who serves the fairy king."

"Sounds gross," Sam said, making a face. "And thanks a lot, Randi Jo. Do I look like the hobgoblin type to you?"

Randi Jo giggled. "Don't be silly, Sam," she said. "Puck's the best part in the whole show. Besides, it has to be played by the spunkiest person in school. And that's definitely you!"

Sam cocked her head and raised her eyebrows. "Really?" she asked. "I mean, I know I'm spunky, but the spunkiest? And I'm not sure that's much of a compliment."

"Seriously, Sam," Randi Jo said. "Puck is the one who always steals the show. Puck and Nick Bottom, that is. He's the biggest fool in the play."

"Who's going to be Bottom?" Sam asked.

"Well, nothing's for sure until after the auditions, and of course the final decision's up to Mr. Murphy. But I kind of had my eye on Sly for the part."

"The biggest fool in the show? Sounds perfect for Sly," Sam said drily. "But you'll never get him to do it."

"Never say never," Randi Jo corrected her. "I got you, didn't I? Here are some more sides to study. They're handwritten—the copy machine was out of commission. Sorry. I hope you can read them."

"I'm sure I can," Sam said, taking the sheets of paper. "You've got pretty good handwriting."

Randi Jo smiled. "It's the scene where Puck tells the audience about the love potion he's going to give to all the unsuspecting humans . . ."

. . .

At five o'clock that afternoon, the Dreams gathered in the Garrisons' garage for their usual practice session.

"This is getting to be a boring routine, Sylvester," Tony said, slamming out a riff on his drums. "We all have our stuff down pat. When do we get to show it off?"

"Patience, my friend," Sly assured him. "I've got us a few irons in the fire."

"Name one," Tony challenged him. "And don't tell me you booked us at the ladies' auxiliary of the public library. I don't want to hear it."

"Hey, it counts," Sly insisted. "Some of those women are under sixty and they're pretty cool. They really know their music."

"Aw, come on, you guys," Matt interrupted. "Are we still a band or aren't we?"

"Of course we are!" Tiffani replied.

"Then let's shut up and play!" Matt roared, launching into a song. The music was infectious, and soon all the Dreams were caught up in the rhythm.

When the song was done, Matt turned to them all and said, "Hey, what did I tell you? We can still rock!"

"Whoo!" Sam yelled in agreement. Looking back at Matt, she winked and added, "Meet me in the woods tomorrow!"

"I swear, I will be there!" Matt shot back and played a hot guitar riff.

Sly caught the exchange and his heart froze inside him. Had Jake noticed it, too? No, he was still

smiling, totally oblivious. Matt and Sam were saying almost the very words they'd said to each other the night Sly had spied on them. The insane part was that they were flirting with each other right out here in the open, and nobody seemed to notice, let alone care!

Now Jake looked up from his guitar and caught Sam's eye. "I know a place where we can go and be together forever—a place where they can't touch us."

"It's a date," Sam said with a giggle, and striking the keyboard, launched into another Dreams standard. The band picked it up immediately, and the room began to rock again.

Sly's jaw was resting comfortably on the concrete floor. What in the solar system was going on here? Sam had just brazenly flirted with Matt, and she had practically made a hot date with Jake two seconds later, right in front of Tiffani. And Tiff was acting as if nothing had happened!

"What is it, Sly?" Matt asked him, noticing the odd look that was plastered on Sly's face as he watched them finish the song. "Did we play it wrong, or are we better than ever?"

Sly continued to stare at all of them. "I feel like I don't even know you people," he said.

The Dreams exchanged concerned glances and then looked back at Sly. "You okay, buddy?" Tony

asked, coming out from behind his drums and walking up to Sly. "'Cause you aren't acting like you're okay."

"Why is everybody behaving like *I've* lost my mind?" Sly demanded. "I'm the only one around here who's *not* crazy!"

"Take it easy, Sly," Matt said. "Everything's fine, you know? Everybody's happy—or at least nobody's miserable."

"Have you checked with Randi Jo lately?" Sly asked.

But Matt didn't react in the way Sly expected. Far from being embarrassed, he acted like Sly had just made a totally weird comment.

"Checked with her about what?" Matt asked. "The play?"

Sly snorted. "The *play*? Yeah, right. You know what I'm talking about, Matt."

"No, Sly, honestly I don't," Matt said, looking at him blankly. "Do you want to tell me about it?"

Sly looked at the rest of them. They were all staring at him. Well, it was up to him now. Did he want to cause a huge scene that might break up the band? No way. Sly cared about the Dreams too much to do that.

Besides, these were his friends. He didn't want to turn them against each other. But why did they have to go fooling around behind each others' backs? Didn't they see how destructive that was?

"Sly?" Tony said. "Are you still with us, bro?"

"Ah, forget it," Sly said with a sigh. "You're right. Everything's fine. Everybody's great." He gave Jake a look. "Except for Tiffani, maybe."

"Huh?" Jake asked.

"Nothing," Sly said, catching Tiffani staring at him in bewilderment. He added, "Remember where you heard it first."

Sly grabbed his jacket, slung it over his shoulder, and walked up the three steps that led into the Garrisons' house. "I'm going to grab a snack," he told them. "You guys just keep practicing, okay? You sound great. And don't mind me—just keep repeating to yourselves, 'Everything's fine. Everything's fine. . . .'"

Sly stewed over what had just happened as he stood in front of the Garrisons' refrigerator, taking out everything he needed to make himself a triple-decker sandwich.

He was really angry, and why not? No matter what he said, his friends just kept telling him to loosen up and concentrate on getting them a gig.

As if it was his fault that Henry Lee's dad had decided to buy a cement factory instead of Sun Coast Records! Did they think managing was easy? They couldn't even manage their own love lives!

Well, if they couldn't, he would have to do it for them, Sly decided. He looked around the kitchen,

then up at the ceiling. Sam's room was upstairs, he realized. And Sam was out in the garage. . . .

Maybe there was something in her room that he could use to bring her to her senses—or at least to shed some light on this mess!

Stuffing half of the triple-decker into his wide-open mouth, he crept into the living room and up the stairs. Mr. and Mrs. Garrison weren't home from work yet, and Matt's little brother, Dennis, was eating dinner at a friend's house.

Sly found his way to Sam's room and let himself inside, shutting the door silently behind him. He looked around, not really knowing what he was searching for.

Sam was not what you would call a slob. Her room was usually pretty neat. Of course, part of that had to be because she had left most of her stuff back home.

Sly immediately noticed a few handwritten sheets of paper lying in disarray on the bed. Mess in the middle of all this neatness? Sly picked up one of the sheets and read the careful handwriting:

"This potion of mine is the most incredible thing. I can make anyone fall in love with whomever I please! There's nothing like having power over mere mortals. . . ."

Sly blinked. What in the world had he stumbled onto here? What was this "potion" Sam's note was talking about?

He looked over at her vanity . . . and his eyes were immediately drawn to a cut-glass bottle filled with clear liquid. He went over and picked it up. The label read LOVE POTION NUMBER NINE.

Sly carefully examined the bottle. It looked exactly like a bottle of expensive perfume. Then he saw a little booklet with a string attached to it. The booklet also was labeled LOVE POTION NUMBER NINE. Obviously, it had once been attached to the bottle.

Sly read aloud the printed words on the inside of the booklet: "... uniquely suited for use by either men or women. . . . The wearer becomes instantly irresistible to the opposite sex."

Sly didn't know whether to laugh or take it seriously. There couldn't be such a thing as a *real* love potion—could there?

It only took Sly a moment to make up his mind. Someone might come upstairs at any moment, so he didn't want to linger. Leaving the booklet and the sheets of paper exactly where he'd found them, Sly took the bottle and dropped it into the inside pocket of his jacket.

"There," he said as he slid back out into the

hallway, patting the little bottle in his pocket to make sure it was safe. "If she's going to steal other people's boyfriends, she's going to have to do it without any help from this stuff!"

Chapter 5

Auditions took place on Tuesday and Wednesday, with callbacks on Thursday. On Friday afternoon, after his eighth-period chemistry lab, Matt walked down the hall toward the auditorium, where the cast list was due to be posted.

He'd never felt so nervous in his life as when he'd gotten up there to audition—until now, that is. What if he'd gone and made a fool of himself for nothing? What if he'd practiced reading those sides and, in the end, hadn't been cast for anything?

Matt couldn't understand it. He was never this nervous when the Dreams played in front of people. Singing and playing guitar did come naturally to him, of course, and he'd never acted before in his life. Still . . .

He guessed it was because of Randi Jo. She had specifically asked him to audition for this play. He knew she was really looking forward to spending time with him every day at rehearsals. He also knew that Randi Jo's dream was to play Titania to his Oberon.

Matt reached the bulletin board, which was hidden by a group of students. Everyone wanted to see who'd been chosen, including kids who hadn't even auditioned! Finally, Matt got close enough to read the cast list.

There was his name! Matt Garrison as Oberon—and Randi Jo as Titania! Matt felt such a surge of relief flood through him that he nearly passed out.

"Hello, my lord," came a low voice in his ear. "Isn't it fantastic?"

Matt turned to his left and gave Randi Jo a kiss. "Tell the truth: You arranged it this way," Matt said with a grin.

"I have a lot of pull with Mr. Murphy," Randi Jo said with a wink. "No, honestly, Matt, I didn't say a word. We got those parts fair and square, and we're going to be awesome in them. You watch."

She was looking at him with total love. Matt let out a contented sigh, and Randi Jo gave him a quick peck on the cheek. "Gotta go," she said. "But we'll be seeing a lot of each other from now on. I can't wait, Matt. This is going to be so awesome!"

Matt smiled as he watched her walk away, her long, silky blond hair flowing behind her like a veil. She was so beautiful, and she was crazy about him. All because he'd gone and auditioned for this play.

He figured she had a right to feel that way. In all the months they'd been going out together, he'd never spent as much time with her as he would have liked. He was always busy with the Dreams. And when he had had a free afternoon, she had been busy putting out the *Clarion*. "I wonder what they're going to do without her for six weeks," he said under his breath.

"Matt, did you see?" Sam asked, coming over to him from the bulletin board. "We're in!"

"You, too?" Matt asked. "Who are you playing?"

"Puck, your servant!" she said, bowing down to him.

"Great," Matt said, a wry grin on his face. "In that case, you won't mind carrying my books home for me."

"Very funny, very funny," Sam said with a laugh. Slipping her arm through his, she said, "Come on. Let's get out of here. This place is a zoo!"

They walked down the hallway, arm in arm, waving to Sly as they passed through the doors of the school into the California sunshine.

"Why do you think Sly gave us that weird look just now?" Sam asked.

"I have no idea," Matt said. "He's been acting extremely strange lately. I can't figure him out."

"Randi Jo said she wanted him to try out for Nick Bottom," Sam said.

"Yeah," Matt said, nodding. "But he wouldn't do it."

"That's too bad," Sam said. "He would have been great. Neil Swensen isn't much of an actor."

"He's conceited, too," Matt said. "Although Sly's not exactly modest, either. I guess Nick Bottom is supposed to have a swollen head. But Neil's head is so swollen, I don't think he'll be able to fit it inside the donkey mask Bottom has to wear in the second half of the play."

"It would have been such a gas to see Sly playing a donkey, don't you think?" Sam asked.

Matt exchanged glances with her, and they both cracked up. Neither one of them could stop. They wound up gasping for air and holding their aching sides.

"You know," Matt said, "there's only one problem with all of this."

"What's that?" Sam asked.

"We're not going to have any time for the Dreams for an entire month," Matt pointed out.

"True," Sam said. "But, hey, we'll make time. Anyway, we haven't had any gigs lately. And by the time Sly gets on the case and books us some, the play will be over."

"I guess you're right," Matt said dubiously. "But I hate to see Sly's face when we tell him we're doing *A Midsummer Night's Dream* instead of practicing with the band."

. . .

From the school entrance, Sly watched Matt and Samantha as they walked with their arms interlocked and then burst out laughing hysterically.

This was getting worse and worse! Sly felt in his jacket pocket for the bottle of Love Potion Number Nine. It was still there, all right. After he'd swiped it on Monday afternoon, he'd waited to see if Sam's power over men decreased.

Not that Sly believed for a minute that a bottle of perfume could really have that kind of effect on people. Of course it couldn't. Or could it? For the past three days, Sam hadn't done anything suspicious—at least not while Sly had been spying on her. But here she was with Matt again—right out in the open!

Maybe the potion's effects were long lasting, Sly thought. "Oh, come on," he told himself out loud. "Don't be ridiculous, it's just perfume!" Still, Sly was plagued by doubt. He had to know if this stuff really had anything to do with Samantha's sudden control over Matt and Jake.

Sly was still thinking about it when he arrived at Sharkey's, which he liked to think of as his branch

office. He did his best thinking there, over brain food like fries and shakes. Besides, Tony worked there. Which meant to Sly that he didn't have to leave a tip. Tony was at the soda fountain now, working on a couple of super sundaes.

Sly held the bottle of perfume in his hands. He knew it was ridiculous to think that this stuff had anything to do with what was happening. But just to be sure, Sly decided to try an experiment.

"Tony!" he called out, beckoning for his friend to come over to the table where he was sitting.

Tony dropped off the two sundaes and headed over. "Hi, Sly," he said. "What's that you've got there?"

"Oh, this?" Sly asked, holding up the bottle. "Just some cologne I picked up. Want to try some?"

"Not right now, dude. I'm working," Tony said.

"Oh, come on, just try it," Sly insisted.

"No, man. I told you, not right now."

"Here," Sly said, spritzing Tony right in the face with a good, long blast.

"Ow! Man, that burns!" Tony said, rubbing his eyes. "What'd you do that for, Sylvester? I told you no!"

"I just couldn't resist," Sly said, adding, "Just tell yourself it's for the good of science."

"Huh?"

"Never mind," Sly said cryptically.

"Oh, man, my eyes are never gonna be the same," Tony said, still rubbing. "I'm gonna get you for this, Sylvester. No more extra cherries on your sundaes, you hear?"

Just then, Roxanne Miller came through the door into the restaurant. The "fox of foxes," Sly called her. With her silky black hair and perfect honey-colored skin, Roxanne had the attention of every guy in the place.

"Hi, Tony," Roxanne said, giving him a wink and brushing his cheek with her open hand as she passed by. "You smell nice today, baby."

"Mm-mm-mm!" Tony exclaimed happily as Roxanne took a seat at the table next to Sly's. "Excuse me a moment, Sly," he told his friend. "May I take your order, Roxanne?" he asked her.

"It's a pretty tall one," Roxanne said, caressing Tony's hand. "Think you can handle it, big boy?"

"You know I can, mama!" Tony said. Turning to Sly, he asked, "What was the name of that stuff, dude?"

Sly gripped the bottle tightly in his hand. Sure, it could have been just a coincidence. Roxanne Miller could have had her eye on Tony for a long time and just happened to wait for today to let him know she was interested.

Sure. And Matt and Jake could have just fallen for Sam all of a sudden for no reason, too. But

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Sly wasn't so sure anymore. Even though every ounce of logic told him this was crazy, he was starting to believe that this stuff was more than just perfume.

Sly sniffed at the bottle. It really did smell kind of nice—unisex, too. Either a man or a woman could wear it. If this so-called potion was really as powerful as he was beginning to think, he could use it to set things straight!

The Dreams were scheduled to practice at five o'clock, Sly remembered as he checked his watch. The perfect time for experiment number two.

"Let's see," Sly said to himself, trying to remember. "The little booklet that came with the bottle said that the user would be irresistible to the opposite sex. And on Sam's piece of paper, she wrote that whoever used it would fall for the first person they saw."

. . .

Sly was the first one to arrive at practice. When he walked into the Garrisons' kitchen, Matt's little brother, Dennis, was there eating a huge jelly doughnut.

"Hi, Squirt," Sly said. "Here, you don't want all of that." With a quick move, he lifted the rest of the doughnut out of Dennis's hands.

"Hey!" Dennis yelled. "Give that back!"

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"Didn't your parents tell you that sugar wasn't good for you?" Sly asked him, raising the jelly doughnut to his lips.

"You touch that and you'll never hear the urgent phone message that was left for you!" Dennis said quickly.

Sly's hand froze just inches from his mouth. "What message?" he asked.

"Give me back my doughnut first," Dennis told him.

Sly reluctantly handed back his gooey prize. "All right, you win," he grumbled. "What's the message?"

"Mphmgrrb . . .," Dennis began.

"Finish the doughnut first," Sly said with an exasperated sigh. "Kids!"

"Tony called," Dennis finally got out. "He said he'll be late for practice because he's got a business engagement with Roxanne Miller."

"Business!" Sly repeated. "Yeah, right. Boy, you know what I like about this band is its singular focus and its unwavering dedication. Sheesh! If it wasn't for me, the Dreams would have already fallen apart."

"What?" Tiffani Smith was standing in the doorway. "What are you talking about, Sly?"

Sly cast a sidelong glance at Dennis. "Don't you have any homework to do?" he asked.

"Nope," Dennis answered, with a provocative smile.

"All right, how much?" Sly asked.

"A dollar," Dennis replied. "Make it two."

Sly rolled his eyes and forked over the money. The Dreams were in serious trouble, he reasoned. This was no time to get caught up in a bargaining session with a barracuda like Dennis.

The twelve-year-old pocketed the money and happily bounced out of the room. "Come on into the garage, Tiffani," Sly said. "Tony's going to be late and who knows what the others are up to."

Tiffani stared at him as they went into the garage. "Is that supposed to be some kind of comment, Sly?" she asked.

"Come on," Sly begged her. "Can't you see what's going on right under your nose? Sam's after your boyfriend. Do I have to make it any plainer?"

"Ridiculous," Tiffani said flatly. "Sly, you're really losing it. I don't know what's come over you."

"Okay, don't believe me," Sly shot back. "Nobody else does. That doesn't change the facts—"

Sly broke off when he heard the roar of Jake's motorcycle as it came down the street and stopped at the Garrisons' driveway. Whipping out the bottle of Love Potion Number Nine, he pointed it straight at Tiffani. "Here goes nothing!" he shouted, spritzing it at her full force.

"Sly! What are you—?" Tiffani couldn't finish, because suddenly she was sneezing violently. She stopped just in time for Jake to come sauntering through the door. He took one look at Tiffani, swept her into his arms, and gave her a long, passionate kiss.

"Wow!" Tiffani gasped as Jake let her go. "What was that for?"

"I haven't seen you in almost four hours," Jake explained, letting her go and heading for the corner where his guitar was stowed.

Sly swallowed hard. *It worked!* he exulted silently. *I did it! I got them back in love with each other again!*

One problem down, one or two to go. . . . Sly wasn't quite sure how many more spritzes it would take. But he felt sure of one thing now. As insane as it seemed, this stuff was powerful. Whatever happened, he couldn't let it fall back into the wrong hands.

Sam and Matt, suddenly burst through the doorway together, arm in arm. "Congratulate us, you guys!" Sam said. "We got cast in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and we're both leads!"

"That's awesome!" Tiffani cried.

"All right, you guys!" Jake said, giving Matt a high five. "That's cool. You're gonna be pretty busy, huh?"

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"Oh. Yeah," Matt said, biting his lip and turning to Sly. "That's right. Look, Sly, it's only for six weeks, but Sam and I aren't going to be able to make many practices."

"Like how many?" Sly asked, getting a sinking feeling.

"Like none," Sam replied. "Maybe one or two on the weekends."

"What about gigs?" Sly asked, trying not to sound frantic. "I've got a lot of things in the works."

"Keep working on them," Matt advised him. "Judging from past experience, gigs take time to develop. No offense, but by the time you get anything together, we'll probably be free again."

"Yeah," Sam agreed. "Cheer up, Sly. The Dreams will survive without us for a month. We're not that fragile, are we?"

"You tell me," Sly demanded, staring right at Sam before turning away and heading outside.

"Hey, Sly, where are you going?" Tiffani called after him.

"To get some fresh air," Sly called back. "I'm suffocating in here."

Out on the street, Sly listened to the sounds of the Dreams, minus Tony's drums, coming from the Garrisons' garage. The band still sounded good, he had to admit, in spite of all of Sam's efforts to break

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them apart. But how good would they sound after a layoff of a whole month?

It was time for drastic action, Sly realized. He had to put a stop to this acting stuff or the Dreams might be finished altogether!

Chapter 6

"Take this bottle of love potion and put some on the eyes of the young man from Athens. You'll know him by his Athenian clothing." Matt stood onstage, his arm around Samantha, delivering his lines as Oberon. They had been rehearsing for two weeks, and the play was really starting to come together.

"Fear not, my lord. Your servant shall do so!" Sam replied. With a leap in the air, she ran off to accomplish her mission.

"Great! That scene is really coming along!" Mr. Murphy called out from his seat in the house. "Sam, you can get even more excited there at the end."

"Okay," Sam said, nodding her understanding from the side of the stage.

"Now let's do the scene with Titania and Nick

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Bottom. Randi Jo, you and Neil get ready. I'm going to get a drink of water. Five-minute break for you two. The rest of you, I'll see you next time."

Most of the actors began heading toward the auditorium doors. Sam rejoined Matt in the center of the stage.

"I'm ready to get out of here," she said to him. "Are you coming?"

"No," Matt replied. "I'm going to wait for Randi Jo to finish and then get a ride home with her."

"Okay!" Sam said. "I'll see you back at the house."

"Hey, we work really well together, don't we?" Matt asked, giving her a smile. "That scene went pretty well."

"Are you kidding? We're fantastic. Didn't you already know that from the Dreams?" Sam leaned over and gave Matt an affectionate hug. "See you later."

Sam turned to go out the backstage door, and Matt headed for the front row of the audience where his book bag was sitting. He figured he might as well get a head start on his homework. As he jumped down from the stage, he thought he saw a familiar figure duck behind the seats in the last row and scuttle out the rear doors. Matt didn't get a good look, but he would have sworn it was Sly.

Matt could understand why Sly might want to

drop in on a rehearsal, but why would he hide like that? Matt decided he would just forget about Sly right then. He wasn't in the mood to confront him about the strange behavior he had been demonstrating lately. Sooner or later, Sly would get over the fact that Matt and Sam had decided to take time out from the Dreams to do this play.

Randi Jo walked out onstage with Neil Swensen. "What do you mean, you won't wear the donkey costume?" she asked, clearly upset. "You have to! It's part of the play!"

"Well, I've changed my mind," Neil insisted. "I'm not going to make a fool out of myself. I'm an actor, not a clown!"

Matt shook his head in disgust. Neil Swensen wasn't much of either. It had really been a struggle for Randi Jo and the other cast members to put up with his tantrums—and now this!

"If I have to wear that stupid costume, I quit!" Neil was saying. "Find yourself another Bottom!" He stalked off and Randi Jo chased after him.

"Neil, wait!" she called out. "Matt, come help me talk him into wearing this. He won't listen to me."

Matt got up to help her, but when the two of them walked out the backstage door of the auditorium, Neil Swensen was nowhere to be seen.

"We've got to find him," Randi Jo said desperately. "Nobody else wants to play the role. Look, you

go that way, I'll go this way. I'll meet you back here, okay?"

"Okay," Matt said, taking off to find the reluctant Neil.

"Oh, if only Sly Winkle would have taken the part!" Randi Jo lamented as she set off in the opposite direction. "Nick Bottom is supposed to be a fool—not a jerk!"

. . .

Sly crept back into the auditorium, only to find it deserted for the moment. *Good*, he thought. This was his chance to find Randi Jo and get her alone. She was probably backstage somewhere. He crept quietly down the aisle and up the steps at the side of the stage.

Sly stepped out onto the stage and into the spotlight. He felt the warmth of the lights on his face and they charged him with energy. He looked out over the sea of empty seats, imagining them filled with cheering people, applauding him for . . . for just being Sly Winkle, the most fantastic human being to hit the planet in centuries.

Spotting something on the floor next to him, Sly bent down and picked it up. It was a donkey head made of soft, flexible rubber, like an expensive Halloween mask. "Way cool," Sly said appreciatively. "I wonder where this thing came from?"

Even more, he wondered what he would look

like wearing it. He knew there was a huge mirror on the back wall of the stage behind the rear curtain. The dance students used it when they practiced there. Slipping the mask over his head, Sly found himself plunged into utter darkness.

"Hey, who turned out the lights?" he asked, his voice muffled a bit by the mask, which fit tightly over his head. "I hope I can get this thing off," he muttered, straightening it so he could see out of the eyeholes.

"There. That's better." He walked to the mirror and checked himself out. When he saw what he looked like, Sly burst into a loud guffaw. He was totally hilarious!

"Extremely gnarly! Bodacious!" he said, turning this way and that to model the mask for himself, laughing all the while.

Then, in the mirror, he saw Randi Jo coming through the rear doors of the auditorium. Now was his chance. In that moment, his mind snapped into focus. Had he brought the love potion? If Matt happened to come back, Sly might need it.

He felt in his jacket pocket for the bottle.

Sly fumbled with the bottle, holding it up in front of his mask so that he could see it better through the tiny eyeholes. Which way did the nozzle point, anyway?

"Yeaow!" Sly screamed as he accidentally

sprayed himself right in the eye. This stuff really did burn, Sly realized, bending over as he tried to rub and blink the potion out of his eye.

"You came back!" Randi Jo called excitedly. Sly didn't think she was talking to him at first. After all, he hadn't gone anywhere to come back from.

But then Randi Jo came up to him and gave him a big hug. "Oh, I'm so glad you're here. I've been going frantic, running all over the school trying to find you!"

Forgetting for the moment that he was wearing the donkey mask, Sly stared at Randi Jo, trying to figure out what she was talking about and why she was acting so glad to see him.

"Come on, now. You wouldn't quit, would you?" Randi Jo asked, suddenly getting flirty and caressing Sly's arm. "After all, you're the guy I fall in love with, right?"

"Huh?!" Sly nearly choked when he heard Randi Jo's words. She was staring warmly at him, her face only inches from his.

"Come on. Let's try it once before everyone gets back. That way we'll be prepared to do it for them."

"Wh-what are you talking about, Randi Jo?" Sly asked, his voice husky. What was she saying?

"You look perfect," Randi Jo continued. "Don't worry about a thing. You're going to be incredible."

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"I—I am?" Sly whispered.

"Now, let's see . . . where should we start?" Randi Jo asked.

"Y-y-you start," Sly said, swallowing hard. It was the potion. He was sure of it. He'd sprayed it on himself, and now Randi Jo was out of her mind with love for him!

"Baby," she said softly, taking both his hands and kissing them, "until I met you, I didn't know what passion was."

"You're kidding," Sly said, looking for an escape route but not finding one. Randi Jo was backing him up against the curtain.

"You're mine now," Randi Jo was saying, with the look of a tigress on her gorgeous face. "And I don't even care if he finds out!"

"B-b-but . . ."

"What is he going to do about it, anyway? I do what I want to do, and I love who I want to love!" She placed her hands on either side of his face and planted a big wet one right on his snout.

Sly stood frozen to the spot, not sure how to react, for a long moment. "I—I can't do this, Randi Jo," he stammered. "I just can't."

"Don't be silly!" Randi Jo said, putting her hands on his shoulders. "You're doing fantastically—in fact, you've never been this good!"

Sly had heard just about enough. He had to get out of there before Randi Jo went any further. With a

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wild yell, he ran to the front of the stage and jumped off. Never looking back, he yanked off the mask and flew up the aisle and out the rear doors. Behind him, he could hear Randi Jo's surprised voice calling, "Wait! Come back!"

But Sly kept on running until he was back outside in the fresh evening air. The breeze was blowing in off the ocean and the sun was about to set.

Everything had changed, in a matter of minutes. *Everything*. He'd gone and done it now. He'd made his best friend's girl fall hopelessly in love with him!

Chapter 7

Sly drove along the beachfront. He didn't know where he was going, just that he needed to think. In fact, the same thought kept going through his mind over and over again: I just made my best friend's girl fall in love with me!

He had to tell Matt right away.

There was no way Sly could live with the guilt. He wasn't used to this emotion. The last time Sly had felt so guilty was when he was twelve years old. He had taken his dad's car for a spin around the block and had crashed it into a fire hydrant. But not even that had been as serious as stealing his best friend's girl!

It was getting dark. Matt would be home from rehearsal. Sly swung around and headed for the Garrisons' house. He burst into the living room just

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as the entire family was settling down to watch a video.

"Hello, Sly!" Mr. Garrison said. "Long time no see."

"Hi, Mr. G., Mrs. G.," Sly said, surveying the room. "Hey! *The Princess Bride*. That's one of my favorite movies."

"Have a seat, Sly," said Mrs. Garrison to him, even though he'd already done so.

"Thanks," Sly said as he grabbed a handful of popcorn. One thing about Sly: Nothing made him lose his appetite. Not guilt, not worry, not anything.

"Great popcorn, Mrs. G.," he assured her. "Unfortunately, I can't stay." Then, biting his lip, he turned to Matt. "May I please speak to you alone?"

Matt exchanged a quick, worried glance with Samantha, and then got up and followed Sly into the kitchen. "What's up, Sly?" Matt asked. "You seem upset."

"Upset? Yes, I'd say I'm upset. Matt, you've got to believe me, it was an accident. Whatever happens, that's the truth."

"What are you talking about, Sly?"

"Randi Jo's in love with me," Sly blurted out before he could stop himself. "I accidentally sprayed myself with this love potion I found, and the next thing I knew—boom!"

Matt looked at Sly long and hard. Then he burst out laughing all of a sudden. "This is a joke,

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right?" he asked. "Sly, I've gotta hand it to you. You really had me going there for a minute. You looked so worried."

"I *am* worried!" Sly said. "And I am not kidding! Listen to me, Matt—your girlfriend, Randi Jo, is after me in a big way! Don't you even care?"

"Oh, come on, Sly, get real. I mean, you're a good-looking guy, I guess, but—"

"What's up, you two?" Samantha asked, coming out of the living room. "I heard Matt laughing."

Sly looked at Matt and then at Sam. Suddenly it hit him. No wonder Matt didn't care if Randi Jo was in love with him. Matt wasn't in love with Randi Jo anymore—he was in love with Sam!

"You want to tell her, Sly?" Matt asked, looking at him as if he were crazy. "Go ahead."

Sly slowly backed toward the front door. "Uh, that's okay. It doesn't matter, anyway. It's not important unless you think it's important, know what I mean, Matt? Bye, you guys. I'll let myself out." He opened the door and slipped out, closing it quickly behind him.

Whoa, baby, Sly thought. This situation is getting worse by the minute. Everyone was treating him as if he were crazy, but *he* wasn't crazy. All the rest of them were! And while he wasn't sure yet how to solve the problem, he was certain of one thing: The solution was in his pocket, in the form of a little bottle labeled LOVE POTION NUMBER NINE. Only he, Sly

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Winkle, could untangle this twisted web of love and set things right again.

. . .

"Where in the world could I have put it?" Sam asked herself, searching her vanity for the bottle of perfume Henry had given her. She'd been so busy for the past two weeks that she hadn't even noticed it was missing, and she had no idea how long it had been gone.

"There's no place else I would have put it," Sam reasoned. "But I must have, right? Because it's not here." Sam had never thought of herself as the absentminded type. "What's going on?" she wondered aloud. "Am I getting old before my time?"

"What are you doing, practicing your lines?" Matt asked, poking his head through the doorway.

"No, I wish," Sam replied. "Henry gave me ~~this~~ bottle of wonderful perfume—and it's gone!"

"Have you talked to Dennis?" Matt asked. "He's usually a good bet when things are missing."

"I'll definitely have a little chat with him," Sam said, scowling. "That bottle meant a lot to me. It's one of the few things I have to remind me of Henry."

"Couldn't you have just misplaced it?" Matt asked.

"I could have, but that wouldn't be like me," Sam said, sitting on the edge of her bed and sighing with frustration.

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"Well, you know," Matt said, sitting next to her, "you were really sad after Henry left. Sometimes people act weird at times like that. I mean, look at Sly. I've never seen him act *this* strange, and Sly's a pretty strange guy to begin with."

"Yeah," Sam said, scrunching up her nose. "What is it with him lately?"

"I wish I knew," Matt said. "He was just trying to convince me that Randi Jo was suddenly in love with him!"

"What?" Sam exclaimed.

"Seriously," Matt went on.

"Oh, man," Sam said, shaking her head. "We've got to do something to help him. He's gone totally overboard."

"Wipeout city," Matt agreed. "But what I can't figure out is what's really eating him. You know, like with you maybe forgetting things because Henry left town. What is it with Sly?"

"The only thing I can think of is the Sun Coast Records deal falling through."

"Yeah!" Matt agreed, snapping his fingers. "That's got to be it. That would definitely knock Sly off his rocker."

"And you know, he must be really upset that the two of us are in the play," Sam pointed out. "That could be bothering him, too."

"Sure," Matt said. "He must feel like the Dreams are falling apart. Aw, poor Sly!"

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"But how can we help him?" Sam asked.

Matt turned, setting his gaze on her. "I've got it," he said. "We've got to convince Sly we still care a lot about the band, right?"

"Right . . ."

"Well, why don't we get the Dreams a gig ourselves?" Matt asked.

Sam sprang to her feet. "Matt, that is such an excellent idea!"

"We'll do it without telling him," Matt said excitedly. "Then when the gig's all nailed down, we'll present him with the good news. That'll show him we care!"

"That'll show him California Dreams is alive and well," Sam said. "Matt, you're a genius!"

"Thank you," Matt stood up and took a little bow. "From here on in, let's be looking for a gig."

"Right," Sam said. "As soon as I finish looking for my bottle of perfume. . . ."

. . .

On Saturday afternoon, the Dreams were having their first for-real practice session in over two weeks, and Sly had come prepared. It was a rare occasion these days to have the whole band together in the same room.

"People," he announced when the musicians took their first break, "I'm going to give you a break-down of our upcoming practices, so you can put the time away."

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"Still no gigs, Sylvester?" Tony asked laconically.

"Working on them, Tony," Sly said, trying to muster up a cocky attitude. "We've got a lot of irons in the fire."

"I can think of something else that's gonna be on fire if we don't get a gig soon," Tony said, twirling his drumsticks.

"Hey, man," Sly said defensively. "Don't look at me. How can I go out there with full confidence when we're not operating as a unit? Do you realize we haven't all gotten together to practice in fifteen days? Fifteen!"

"Uh, Sly," Sam said. "About this schedule? I've got some conflicts."

Sly looked up at the ceiling and sighed noticeably. "Like how many?" he asked, with an air of infinite patience.

"Like all of them," Sam replied.

"Me, too," Matt said, shaking his head as he looked at the list Sly had given out. "All of these are weekday afternoons, and Sam and I have rehearsals for the play."

"The play!" Sly repeated, his infinite patience suddenly at an end. "Oh, right, the play. What was I thinking? That we still had a band here? Isn't it bad enough you guys are stabbing each other in the back? At least you could show up for practice occasionally."

"Stabbing each other in the back?" Jake said.

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curling his lip as if he'd tasted something bad. "Who's been stabbing who in the back?"

"Never mind," Sly said, waving them all off. "I'm not getting in the middle of this any more than I already have."

"Look, Sly," Matt broke in, "why don't you call a couple of practices on Sunday afternoons? We don't rehearse on Sundays."

Tony interrupted. "Except that this Sunday afternoon I'm going to Laguna with Roxanne Miller," he informed them. "And I'm not changing it, Sylvester, so save your breath."

"Your dedication is truly underwhelming," Sly responded with a smirk of disdain. "That's the spirit. Anybody have any conflicts for the Sunday afternoon after that? Or shall we just put our instruments in the deep freeze and hope they don't crack when we thaw them out in the year two thousand?"

The band members looked at each other and Sly knew what they were all thinking—that he was overreacting. That he'd been acting weird lately. Well, if they'd seen what he'd seen, they'd be acting weird, too. No, he was not wrong about the Dreams. This band was in deep trouble.

"Well, then, I guess we're on for a week from Sunday," Sly said, giving them all an icy smile. "Have a great practice. I'll see you." Grabbing his jacket, Sly sauntered out of there, cool as a Creamsicle.

Sam came through the doorway after him. "Sly, wait!" she called out as he fished for his car keys. "Come on, Sly," she said, walking up to him and putting a hand on his shoulder. "It isn't that bad. A couple of weeks from now, everything will be back to normal. Just be patient."

"Patient," Sly repeated. "Right. Sure. And what about all the other stuff that's been going on, Samantha?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" Sam asked, backing off a step.

"Don't give me that innocent look," Sly said. He pointed his finger at her. "I know what you've been up to!"

"What?" Sam asked. "What have I been up to? You tell me!"

Sly laughed mirthlessly. "You can't put that act over on me, Sam," he said. "I've seen what I've seen, and I've heard what I've heard."

"Huh?"

"And I've got the evidence to prove it," he finished, folding his arms on his chest in a gesture of satisfaction.

"What evidence?" Sam asked in complete amazement. "Sly, what are you talking about?"

"Don't you think I know what you've been up to with Matt?" Sly asked.

Sam's jaw dropped, and she covered her open

mouth with her hand. "Oh! That!" she gasped, looking for all the world like she'd gotten caught with her hand in the cookie jar. "Oh, Sly, we were going to surprise you with the news as soon as it was a sure thing!" she said apologetically.

"Oh, don't worry," Sly said, taking Sam's statement as an admission of guilt that she'd stolen Matt from Randi Jo. "I was surprised, all right. I could not have been more surprised."

Sam shot him a warm smile and giggled. "Well, you've got to admit, it's a great idea," she said. "Listen, don't tell Matt that you know, okay? He's really excited about it, and he wants to lay it on the whole band at the same time. You know, to really perk up our morale!"

Sly just stared at her, totally flabbergasted. He couldn't believe how brazen she was being. "Let me tell you something," he said. "You may think it's all fun and games, but this has gotten way out of hand. I'm going to put a stop to your little scheme—and I've got just the stuff to do it with, too!"

Turning away from the astonished Sam, Sly flung open the door of his dad's car, got inside, gunned the engine, and burned rubber out of there.

Ha! he thought to himself bitterly. *Let her stew on that!*

...

Behind him, Sam stood frozen on the curb. She couldn't understand it. Why was Sly being so mean to her? Why was he picking on her if he knew about her plan with Matt to get the band a gig?

Chapter 8

On Monday, Sly went to his locker before lunch. He wanted to check on the bottle of potion to make sure it was all right. He'd had his doubts for a while there. If someone had told him that Love Potion Number Nine could really make a person fall for someone else and forget all about their boyfriend or girlfriend, Sly would have laughed in their face.

Not anymore, though. Every time Sly had sprayed someone with the stuff, weird things had happened. The first time, he thought it could have been a coincidence. But he couldn't believe everything that had happened was coincidence.

And Randi Jo was in love with *him* now! Sly was trying to open his combination lock, but he was

so lost in thought that he kept getting the numbers wrong.

Maybe the stuff would wear off after a while. That would be the best thing that could happen. Or maybe it was permanent. In that case, he could always leave well enough alone. Matt was in love with Sam; Jake and Tiffani were back together.

As for Randi Jo being in love with him? *Well*, Sly thought with a shrug. *Why not?* She was a definite eleven on a scale of one to ten.

Sly began to smile. It wasn't right, it wasn't honest, it wasn't natural—but it wasn't exactly a tragedy, either. In fact, it could be the best thing that had ever happened—

Wait a minute! Sly thought as he finally got the combination right. What was he thinking? Matt was his best friend! Matt was in love with Randi Jo—at least he had been until Sam had used her love potion on him. Sly couldn't take Randi Jo away from him! He had to get Matt and Randi Jo back together again, even if Matt didn't want any part of her!

"Hey, Winkle." Sly looked up and saw Jake staring at him. "What are you looking at? Is something growing in your locker?"

"Ah, no!" Sly said with a quick laugh. "What's up, Jake? Everything okay with you and Tiffani?"

"Yeah," Jake said, inching closer to Sly. "Actually, to tell you the truth, I've got some bad

news for her." He gave Sly a wink and a crooked smile.

"Y-y-you do?" Sly asked.

"Yeah. Real bad. She's gonna scream and cry bitter tears when I tell her."

Jake was about to dump Tiffani! The potion must have suddenly worn off. Sly knew he had to do something—and fast!

Sly looked over Jake's shoulder and saw Tiffani coming toward them. He reached quickly into his locker, felt in his jacket pocket for the potion, whipped it out, and gave Jake a blast foursquare in the face.

"Yeow!" Jake howled, his hands flying to his eyes. "Wimple, I'm gonna kill you as soon as I can see you again! What do you think you're doing?"

"Someday you'll thank me," Sly assured him. He stuffed the bottle back in his jacket pocket and shut his locker just as Tiffani walked up.

"Okay, Wimple, time to die," Jake said, blinking his sore eyes open. "Oh, hey, Tiff!" he said when he saw her. Forgetting all about Sly, Jake grabbed Tiffani in his arms and kissed her!

Sly was relieved. He didn't want Jake to suddenly remember his threat, so he crawled past them, hoping Jake wouldn't notice.

But he didn't have to worry. Jake was totally absorbed in Tiffani. As Sly rounded the corner of the

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hallway, he glanced back and saw Jake reach into his shirt pocket.

"I've got some really bad news for you, Tiff," Jake said.

"Uh-oh," Tiffani said. "What is it?"

"Tickets to the Rock-o-rama Concert Friday night!" Jake said as he brandished two tickets. "I had to wait in line for three hours last night! Now is that bad or what?"

"Totally!" Tiffani bubbled, giving Jake a big hug.

Sly wheeled around and headed for the cafeteria. "Totally bodacious!" he congratulated himself under his breath. "Well, thanks to yours truly, those two should be okay for a while. Now, for Randi Jo and Matt . . ."

. . .

Tony was working the Wednesday evening shift at Sharkey's when the cast of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* trooped in and took over two tables in the far corner.

"Hey, you all!" Tony called, coming over to exchange high fives. "How's it going? Are we talking smash hit here?"

"Hi, Tony," Randi Jo replied. "I don't know. Gang, how's it going? What do you say?"

"Pretty good," Matt said. "Making progress."

"He's so humble," Sam said with a grin, giving

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Matt a hug. "He's fantastic, I stink, and everyone else belongs on Broadway."

They all cracked up at that one. "Sam's totally awesome as Puck," Randi Jo informed Tony. "Nobody can believe how good she is."

"The whole audience is going to fall in love with you, Sam," Matt predicted with a gleam in his eye.

Sly Winkle glided by them at that moment on his way to the men's room. He gave Tony a look and said, in a low voice, "I need to speak with you alone, man."

"Later, Sylvester," Tony replied. "I'm taking everyone's order."

"Yoo-hoo, Sly!" Randi Jo called out and waved. Sly gave her a sickly smile, rolled his eyes, and headed off toward the rest room double time.

Randi Jo sighed. "If only I could get through to Sly," she told Tony. "I really want him to be in the play. He'd be the perfect Bottom, especially now that Neil Swensen's quit."

"Say what?" Tony asked.

"Nick Bottom," Randi Jo explained. "It's the funniest part in the play."

"Sly's pretty funny," Tony agreed. "Yeah, in fact, he's been acting even funnier than usual, lately."

"I'll say," Matt said. "You wouldn't believe some of the things he said to me this past week."

"Such as?" Randi Jo asked.

Matt gave her a long look. "Maybe I'd better not say. Trust me, you're better off not knowing."

"Gee, is it that bad?" Randi Jo asked. "Someone had better talk to him. You know, find out what's bugging him."

"You'd be surprised what's bugging him," Sam said. "He thinks I'm some kind of troublemaker, but he won't tell me what he means."

"He was sneaking around the auditorium last Friday," Matt remembered.

"That must have been him in the donkey mask!" Randi Jo said suddenly with a gasp, her hand flying to her mouth.

"What?" Tony asked. "What donkey mask?"

"WICKS!" Sharkey's voice came bellowing from the other side of the swinging doors that led to the kitchen. "Are you workin' or socializin'?"

Tony looked around quickly and spotted Carla Morton, who was taking a break. She had her order pad next to her. "Carla, cover me for a few minutes, okay, baby?" he asked her. "You know Tony loves you."

Carla looked up at him skeptically.

"I'll split my tips with you for the rest of the shift," Tony promised.

"You've got yourself a deal," Carla said. "I'll be keeping track of the money, *babe*. So don't try to sweet-talk your way out of keeping your promise."

Tony looked at the rest of them and smiled innocently as Carla went off to cover his shift. "Now, what were you all saying about Sly and a donkey mask?" he asked, fascinated.

"Well," Randi Jo said, "let me explain a little about the play first. There are these two guys and two girls who keep falling in and out of love with each other, right?"

"I get you so far," Tony said. "Cool. So?"

"Then these fairies who live in the woods get mixed up in things," Randi Jo went on. "Especially Sam's character, Puck. Puck tries to get the right guys and girls in love with each other, but instead *really* messes everything up until the end."

"Uh-huh," Tony said, getting a little confused. "And who is the guy in the donkey mask?"

"Wait, I'm getting to that," Randi Jo told him, giggling a little. "I realize it's complicated, but that's what's so fun about it. See, there's also this wedding going on."

"Who's getting married?" Tony asked.

"The duke and this Amazon queen," Matt said.

"Fresh!" Tony enthused. "Right on, duke!"

"And there are these town workmen who are trying to get together this play for the wedding, and they're rehearsing in the woods where the fairies are," Sam picked up, in her usual rapid-fire way of talking. "And the fairies turn this guy Bottom into a

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donkey, and Matt, he's the fairy king, bewitches his wife, the fairy queen—that's Randi Jo—so that she falls in love with the donkey!"

"And . . . so you want Sly to be the donkey," Tony said, repeating what for him was definitely the best part.

"Unless, of course, you decide to change your mind and play the part yourself," Randi Jo said invitingly.

"Uh-uh, no way, excuse me, please," Tony demurred. "I am not getting up onstage in front of everybody in school wearing a donkey head." He looked from Matt to Sam and then to Randi Jo. "But I'll be happy to try to get Sylvester to do it for you."

"All right!" Matt said.

"Cool!" Sam agreed, applauding.

"Now, I'm not saying I can definitely talk him into it," Tony warned them.

"Just do what you can, okay?" Randi Jo begged him. "Neil Swensen walked out on the play last Friday, and it isn't easy to recast this part."

"I bet not," Tony said.

"And, Tony," Matt added, "try to find out what's bugging Sly. I thought I knew him pretty well, but . . . man!"

"I'll check him out," Tony assured them as Sly reemerged from the rest room area and walked slowly past them all. He gave them a little wave and a fake

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smile as he went. "In fact, the man said he wanted to talk to me. I'll see you later, dudes and ladies."

Tony took off after Sly. "Yo, Sylvester," he said, putting a hand on Sly's shoulder. "You wanted to have a private meeting with me?"

Sly looked back at the tables where the members of the cast were sitting; then he yanked Tony into a nearby booth.

"Can you keep a secret?" Sly asked him.

"Man, you know me," Tony said. "Can I keep a secret?"

"No," Sly said with a scowl.

"Hey, man!" Tony said, insulted.

"Just listen to me for a second," Sly said, shaking his head. "I'm telling you this because I have to tell somebody, and you're the only person left who hasn't gone bonkers!"

"Uhhh, okay," Tony said. "You want to lay it on me, or are you gonna make me guess?"

"Here it is," Sly said, laying both his palms on the table in front of him and staring straight at Tony. "You're not going to believe me, but it's the truth. Sam got this little bottle of love potion, I don't know where from, but she has been using it on guys to make them fall in love with her."

"Sly . . .," Tony tried to interrupt.

"Just be quiet until I'm finished!" Sly ordered.

"I know it's difficult, but try to keep an open mind. I know what I sound like, believe me."

"Good," Tony said sincerely.

"First Sam made Matt fall for her. I overheard them together, so I know what I'm talking about. Then I caught Sam with Jake!"

"But that's impossible!" Tony said, unable to contain himself any longer. "Matt's nuts about Randi Jo, and Jake's crazy about Tiffani!"

"That's what I thought until I found the bottle of potion!" Sly said, a wild look in his eyes. "But I fixed Sam. I swiped the stuff!"

"You *what*?"

"Remember, you're sworn to secrecy," Sly reminded him. "Yeah, I took it, and she's *not* getting it back."

"Let me see this stuff," Tony said.

"Oh, no," Sly said. "I've got it put away somewhere. I only take it out to use it."

"Oooohhhh," Tony said, still humoring Sly. "So you've been using it, too, huh? Is that what you sprayed in my eye last week?"

"It was just an experiment. And I was only trying to get the right people back together again," Sly said emphatically. "Listen, it worked with Jake and Tiffani. But then I messed up royally, and now Randi Jo is in love with me!"

Tony froze for a long moment. "You . . . say . . . what?"

Sly nodded slowly. "You see the position I'm

in," he said urgently. "I've got to use the potion on Randi Jo and Matt to make them fall in love with each other again. But I can't seem to get near her, she's always so busy. And it's got to be at the perfect time, so that the next guy she sees is Matt! That's the only way it'll work!"

Tony had the funny feeling he'd heard all this before, but he couldn't figure out where. In any case, Sly needed help—more help than Tony could ever give him.

Still, there *was* something he could do . . .

"Hey, Sly, I've got a great idea!" Tony said.

"Fantastic, Wicks!" Sly said, smiling in sheer relief and excitement. "What is it?"

"You ought to take a part in the play," Tony told him. "Randi Jo was just telling me they're looking for somebody."

"Oh, no," Sly said, shaking his head quickly. "The last thing I want to do is spend a lot of time with Randi Jo. That would definitely give her the wrong idea. The other day, when I walked in on a rehearsal, she couldn't keep her hands off me!"

"But weren't you just telling me you couldn't get close enough to Randi Jo to spray her with the potion? Being in the play will give you the opportunity!"

Sly blinked rapidly and looked at Tony. "You've got a point," he said. "I guess I could do that. What part are they looking to fill?"

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"The guy who the fairy queen falls in love with," Tony told him.

"Hmm! Who's playing that part?" Sly asked, arching his eyebrows.

"Uh, Randi Jo," Tony said softly.

Sly froze solid. "Forget it," he said. "No way."

"Way, man!" Tony pressed. "Come on, dude. What other chance are you going to have to get Randi Jo and Matt back together? If what you say is true . . ."

"What do you mean, if?" Sly asked, annoyed. "I'm telling you the truth!"

"All right, then," Tony said, thinking of Sly dressed as a donkey. "Don't do it if you don't want to. I thought you were Matt's friend."

That got Sly. Making a face, he said, "All right, all right, I'll do it."

"Don't do it because I said so," Tony warned him. "After all, Sylvester, it's gonna be a lot of work learning all those lines."

"Yeah, I know," Sly grumbled.

Tony grinned, knowing he'd hooked Sly. "Hey, man," he told Sly, "just keep telling yourself that it's all for the sake of friendship."

Chapter 9

The cast of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* had finished their food and was getting up to go. Sly watched them, and Tony turned to look, too.

"It does seem like they're having a blast," Tony said. "You've got to admit that."

Sly watched Matt and Sam as they laughed together about something. "They sure do," Sly said anxiously. He glanced over at Randi Jo, who was still at the table gathering up some papers. She either hadn't noticed Matt's and Sam's behavior, or else she didn't care anymore because she was in love with Sly.

"I don't know how I let you rope me into this, Wicks," he told Tony. "I smell trouble and it doesn't smell good."

"Relax, Sly," Tony assured him. "You're doing

the right thing, trust me. We'll all laugh about this someday. I know I will, anyway."

"Huh?"

"Never mind. Hey, here comes Randi Jo now. You can give her the good news."

"No, Tony, not right now—"

"Hey, Randi Jo!" Tony called over to her. "Sly here's got something he wants to tell you."

"Oh? What is it, Sly?" Randi Jo asked, coming over and giving him an eager look.

"I . . . I . . ."

"He says he's going to be in the play," Tony informed her. "Isn't that right, Sylvester?"

"I, uh . . . yeah, I guess," Sly said, sweat breaking out all over his body.

"Sly, that's fantastic!" Randi Jo cried, giving him a crushing hug.

"Well, you two, I've got to get back to work," Tony said casually. "I see Carla over there giving me the evil eye. Later."

"Tony, wait!" Sly called after him, but Tony paid no attention.

Randi Jo set her hand on Sly's shoulder and gave him an appreciative look. But to Sly it seemed more like passionate adoration.

"Oh, Sly, I could kiss you!" Randi Jo said happily, and she planted a big wet one on Sly's cheek. Sly felt his knees go weak. *Wow*. Where was he? Sharkey's?

"You saved my life," Randi Jo said. "You saved all of our lives."

"Yeah, right," Sly said, waving her comment off. "So what do I have to do?"

"I'll get you a copy of the script so you can start learning your lines. Tell you what: Meet me in the *Clarion* office after school tomorrow, and we can go over it together."

"Uh . . . okay," Sly said, nodding and recovering his wits.

"See you there!" Randi Jo bubbled, giving him another peck on the cheek. "Oh, I can't wait to work with you on this—it's going to be totally awesome!"

She ran out of the restaurant to catch up with the others and tell them the good news.

Sly sank down into his seat and rested his head in his hands. It was too late to back out now. He was in deep, for better or worse.

If he failed, Randi Jo would be in love with him forever, and Sly would have to learn to live with the guilt of it. He guessed it wouldn't be too bad, all things considered.

But Sly was determined not to let that happen. He was going to save his friends from each other, even though it would mean all that nasty hard work on his lines and showing up at all those rehearsals. If he succeeded, the torture would be worth it.

On Thursday, Sly raced up to the *Clarion* office right after school. He wanted to make sure that there were plenty of other people around when he got the script from Randi Jo. He was afraid that whenever the two of them were alone together, she would waste no time in throwing herself at him. He didn't want to go through that again and then have to reject the poor girl.

Unfortunately, the office was deserted except for Randi Jo, who was busy at the copying machine. "Hi, Sly!" she greeted him with a big smile as he entered. "I'm just making a copy of the script for you."

"Okay, great!" Sly shot back, rubbing his hands together nervously. "Good. Uh, where is everybody?"

"They're out gathering next week's stories," Randi Jo informed him. "That's what we do around here. Only I'm kind of busy with the play."

"Right," Sly said, nodding. "Ah, is that going to take a while?"

"Unfortunately, yes," Randi Jo said. "I only just got started. Can you hang out here?"

"No!" Sly said instantly. "I've got to write my hair and wash some letters. I mean, wash my hair and write some letters."

Randi Jo giggled. "Sly, I am so glad you're

doing this part and not Neil Swensen. This is going to be so much fun!"

"I hope so," Sly said anxiously. "I really do."

"Well, if you absolutely have to go, just take these two scenes home with you and look them over. You'll be rehearsing them tomorrow at four o'clock."

Sly took the pages and stuffed them into his knapsack. "Which scenes are they?" he asked.

"The rehearsal and wedding scenes," Randi Jo told him. "See, you and the other workmen are putting on a play for the duke's wedding, and you go rehearse it in the woods. Then later, in the last scene, you put on the play at the wedding."

"Sounds like a laugh riot," Sly said unenthusiastically.

"Wait till you read it," Randi Jo assured him. "There's a lot more to it."

"And you said my character is the big lover?" Sly asked.

"In the little play they put on, yes," Randi Jo said.

"And you play my love in this little play we put on?" Sly asked, wincing.

"No, no," Randi Jo said. "I play the fairy queen, Titania. I fall in love with you while you're lost in the woods."

"Ah, ha . . .," Sly uttered, squirming slightly. "I see. You, uh, you didn't give me that scene?"

"No, I'll give it to you at rehearsal tomorrow.

We aren't scheduled to go over our big love scene for a few days. But don't worry. You and I can go over it just the two of us, someplace quiet, while everyone else is busy with other scenes."

"Just the two of us . . . alone together?" Sly whispered hoarsely.

"Sure," Randi Jo said warmly. "Don't worry, Sly. Just relax. I'll help you with everything."

"Everything?" he repeated.

"Everything."

"Oh, brother," Sly moaned.

"What's the matter?" Randi Jo asked. "Sly Winkle, are you being shy? Oh, that's so cute!" She gave him a hug and a kiss on the forehead. "I'm telling you, you're going to be great. Don't worry!"

"Don't worry," she says," Sly muttered to himself as he retreated from the office, leaving her there to copy the rest of the script. "I'm not worried—I'm frantic!"

. . .

"Ha!" Sly guffawed out loud again for about the ninetyeth time. This play was really pretty funny. He had to hand it to Shakespeare—the guy could have written for *Saturday Night Live*.

His character, Nick Bottom, was definitely the best one in the scenes she'd given him. He got to give orders to all the other workmen, direct the little play they were putting on for the duke's wed-

ding, and cast himself as Pyramus, the romantic lead.

There were a few problems with the script. Bottom came off as kind of a fool, but that was nothing Sly couldn't change by the way he played the part. Besides, if the guy was smart enough to be in charge of things, he obviously couldn't be too much of a dork.

A bigger problem was that the female romantic lead in the little play-within-a-play, *Pyramus and Thisbe*, had to be played by a guy! Sly really pitied the poor slob who had to play that part and dress up as a woman! He wondered what dweeb would get stuck doing it.

Sly checked the cast list Randi Jo had given him along with the scenes. Sly's eyes scanned down the page. There was his own name, penciled in on top of Neil Swensen's, which had been crossed out. Then he came to the character of Flute, the one who played *Thisbe* to his *Pyramus*.

"George Spelvin," Sly read. "Who's he?" Sly racked his brains to come up with a face to match the name. It had to be someone really nerdy, obviously. But try as he might, Sly couldn't remember any George Spelvin at PCH.

Then it hit him. Of course! There wasn't anybody at PCH who would be caught dead playing *Flute*, so they'd gone outside and found somebody to stick with it!

The next day, Sly was still chuckling to himself just thinking of the poor jerk when he pushed open the auditorium doors and walked down the aisle to his first rehearsal.

Matt was there sitting next to Sam. The two of them were engaged in whispered conversation and didn't even notice Sly as he walked right past them.

Randi Jo noticed him, though. She took his arm and kissed him on the cheek, saying, "You don't know how great it makes me feel that you're here!" She then led him over to Mr. Murphy and said, "Sly's here, Mr. M. We can start now."

Mr. Murphy gave Sly a strong handshake. "Welcome to the cast, Sly. Just take a seat for a moment. I'll be ready for you in five minutes."

Sly looked for a place to sit in one of the front rows. He noticed that Jake Summers was sitting in the center of the third row, looking at some sheets of paper. Sly went over and plopped down next to him.

"Hey, dude!" Sly said. "What are you doing here? Is Randi Jo trying to rope you in, too? Do they need some sets built or something?"

Jake groaned uncomfortably and looked away. "Uhhhh. . . not exactly."

"Hey, have you ever heard of a guy named George Spelvin?" Sly asked. "He's going to be play-

ing a romantic leading lady in the play, but I don't think I know him."

"You know him," Jake said flatly.

"I do?" Sly asked incredulously. "Boy, I must be losing my memory or something. How could I forget a tweeby name like that?"

"Shut up, Winkle," Jake grumbled.

"What's the matter, Jake?" Sly asked. "You feel sorry for the guy?" He elbowed Jake in the ribs, but Jake didn't laugh.

"George Spelvin's a fake name," Jake said through gritted teeth. "It's an old theater tradition that Randi Jo told me about. When you don't want people to know you're in something, you use the name George Spelvin. Everybody knows it's fake, but nobody knows who it is till they see him onstage."

"I get it!" Sly said, clapping his hands. "The poor slob's embarrassed. Who could blame him? Boy, I wouldn't be caught dead looking that dumb onstage!"

"You wouldn't?" Jake asked, looking surprised. "You're playing Bottom, aren't you?"

Sly blinked twice. "Yeah," he said. "So?"

"Okay!" Mr. Murphy's voice boomed out. "Workmen, let's rehearse the wedding scene, where they do *Pyramus and Thisbe*. All actors onstage."

Sly got up, and so did Jake. "Wait till you see this," Sly told him. "George Spelvin is about to make a fool out of himself!"

Jake followed Sly onto the stage. "Jake, Mr. Murphy only wants the actors up here," Sly informed him. "Stagehands usually hang out backstage."

Jake was standing there as if he hadn't heard Sly.

"Jake?" Sly asked. "What are you doing here?"

At that moment, Mr. Murphy came up to them and put one hand on Sly's shoulder, the other on Jake's. "Well, boys," he said with a big smile, "are you ready? Pyramus, may I present Thisbe. Thisbe, Pyramus."

Sly stared at Jake as if he were looking at his own painful, violent death.

"Don't say a word, Winkle," Jake said menacingly. "Not one word, I warn you."

"My lips are sealed," Sly promised.

Chapter 10

"**T**hey'd better be, Twinkle. Or you're finished!" Jake stepped forward as Sly retreated behind Mr. Murphy.

"Come on, you two," Mr. Murphy said. "Let's get the scene staged. You can kill each other to your hearts' content later."

Sly and Jake calmed down enough to learn where to go when, and they ran through the scene a couple of times with the other actors. Sly kept cracking up every time he looked at Jake, but everyone else must have figured he was laughing at Shakespeare's lines, which were, after all, pretty raucous.

When they were done, Mr. Murphy said, "Okay, now let's work on the scene between Oberon and Titania. Workmen, off the stage, please."

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Jake followed Sly offstage and said, "Now, Winkle, your hour of destiny is nigh. I am going to slay you, man."

"Please don't kill me, Thisbe—I mean George—I mean Jake—," Sly begged, laughing hysterically until Jake actually grabbed him by the shirt.

"You wanna laugh?" Jake asked him. "It's going to cost you some teeth, Wimple."

"Jake, buddy, pal, how'd you get roped into this stunt?" Sly asked him, trying to contain his laughter and sound sympathetic.

"How did you?" Jake shot back.

"Hey, it's a whole different kind of part," Sly protested. "I don't have to act like a total fool up there!"

"Oh, yeah?" Jake shot back. "What about the donkey costume?"

"The—the what?" Sly suddenly felt like he'd been hit with a wrecking ball. He was just about to ask Jake what he was talking about when they heard Randi Jo and Matt screaming at each other up onstage.

"Who do you think you are, telling me what to do?" Randi Jo was shouting. "I'm not your servant! I'm not your slave! I can kiss whoever I want!"

"Oh, yeah?" Matt yelled back at her. "You'd better watch out who you kiss, or you're going to wind up making a total fool out of yourself!"

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"That's my business," Randi Jo growled, stamping her foot.

Sly couldn't believe it. They were fighting over Randi Jo's love for him, right in front of everyone!

"And what about you?" Randi Jo challenged Matt. "I suppose you've never had your little play-things?"

That seemed to sting Matt. He turned away for a moment before saying, "You can't do this to me. And you're not going to get away with it, either!"

Sly knew he had to do something right away. Feeling for the bottle of Love Potion Number Nine in his pocket, he whipped it out. Then he crept quietly down the aisle and up the steps at the side of the stage, trying not to attract attention.

It was the perfect moment to do it, he knew. They were looking right at each other. All he had to do was sneak up there and spray one of them in the face. It didn't even matter which one. The first person they looked at would definitely be the other one, and then they'd be in love again and Sly's long nightmare would be over.

"Sly, wait!" Mr. Murphy called from his seat in the front row. "What are you doing?"

But Sly wasn't listening, and neither were Matt and Randi Jo. They were so absorbed in their colossal fight that a bomb could have dropped right next to them and they wouldn't have noticed.

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Just as Sly was about to raise the bottle and spray Matt with it, a hand grabbed his and pulled the bottle from his grasp!

"So, it was you who took my perfume!" Samantha gasped, looking at him with eyes full of fury as she stared first at him, then at the bottle she now held in her hand.

"Yes, it was me!" Sly shot back, trying unsuccessfully to get the bottle back.

"Why, Sly?" Sam asked bitterly. "Who told you you could go in my room and swipe my things? And what do you want my love potion for, anyway?"

"You know why, Sam!" Sly lunged for the bottle. The two of them went down in a heap on the stage as they fought for possession of the perfume.

Matt and Randi Jo had stopped yelling at each other and were looking on, confused, as was everyone else in the entire auditorium.

With one final yank, Sly tore the bottle from Sam's hand. But in the struggle a little of the potion must have leaked out and made the bottle slippery, because it flew from Sly's grasp, went flying across the stage, and smashed to pieces against the proscenium arch.

The tinkle of shattering glass echoed in the suddenly silent auditorium. Then a little sob broke from Sam's throat. "My perfume!" she moaned. "Sly, you beast! Now look what you've done!"

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"What I've done?" Sly repeated, astonished. "You're the one who's responsible for everything!"

"I don't know what you're talking about!" Sam insisted.

"Sure you don't," Sly snorted as one of the stagehands got a broom and started sweeping up the pieces of glass.

"I don't!" Sam repeated. "Oh, Sly, do you have any idea what was in that bottle?"

"Do I ever!" Sly responded, heartsick. Now Matt and Randi Jo might never get back together, he realized with a pang. And he would be stuck with Randi Jo in love with him for the rest of his life!

"I hate you!" Sam shouted and ran off the stage in tears, leaving Sly staring at the floor and shaking his head in frustration. He'd been so close, too!

"Sly," Randi Jo said, kneeling down next to him. "Why did you steal Sam's perfume?"

Sly laughed mirthlessly. "Randi Jo," he replied, "if you only knew what was really in that bottle." He got up with a heavy heart and jumped off the stage. He walked up the aisle and out the door of the auditorium, wondering what he was going to do now.

. . .

He was still undecided later that night when the phone rang. It was Randi Jo, but she hadn't called to ask him about Sam's perfume.

"I was wondering if you were free tonight," she said. "I thought we could go over our love scenes together. Are you busy?"

Sly blew out a deep breath. He knew there was no resisting it anymore; there was just no way out. A person didn't come by bottles of love potion every day. Sly knew that for as long as Matt was in love with Sam and Randi Jo was in love with him, he might as well make the best of it.

After all, it wouldn't be right to break Randi Jo's heart when he himself was partially responsible for her condition. "No, I'm not, uh, busy. You want to come over?" he asked.

"Why don't you come over here?" Randi Jo asked.

Sly's parents were out for the evening. The last thing he wanted was to be alone in his house with a love-crazed Randi Jo. Better to rehearse at her house. "I'll be there in half an hour, Randi Jo."

"Super," Randi Jo said eagerly. "See you then!"

Sly hung up and sank down on his bed. This was not what he had envisioned the rest of his life looking like. This was not what he had planned at all.

Still, he figured he ought to look good for his date with doom. He went to the bathroom and combed his hair, brushed his teeth, and then tried on clothes until he got just the right effect. He borrowed his dad's old car to drive over to Randi Jo's.

The door opened for him before he'd had a chance to ring the bell. There was Randi Jo, looking totally awesome in a black minidress. "I'm ready for our love scenes, darling," she said with a wink. "Come on in."

"Uh, okay, sure," Sly said, nodding quickly and slipping past her into the living room. "So—where are your folks?"

"Oh, they're out for the evening," Randi Jo informed him. "It'll be nice and quiet for us."

Sly's heart started pounding loudly. He wondered whether she could hear it.

"Sly, can I get you anything before we start?"

"Water," Sly rasped, his throat suddenly parched.

She passed by him and walked into the kitchen. Soon she was back with his water. Sly drank it down in one gulp and tried to shake the picture of Matt frowning down on him. Not the Matt in this current, pathetic state, but the old Matt, Sly's buddy, who used to be in love with Randi Jo.

"So!" Randi Jo said, plunking herself down on the couch. "Come over here and sit next to me, Sly."

"Uh, sure," Sly said tentatively, settling himself down on the other side of the couch.

"Closer," Randi Jo told him, patting the cushion. "We can read from the same script."

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" Sly asked,

realizing that she was just trying to arrange things so they'd *have* to sit closer to each other.

"It'll help us get into the spirit of the scene. I'll start," Randi Jo said, when he'd finally moved beside her. She held out the script in front of them so they could both see it. "Baby," she read, "until I met you, I didn't know what passion was."

Wait a minute. Sly could have sworn he'd heard those words before. . . .

"You're kidding," he read off the page.

"You're mine now," Randi Jo went on. "And I don't even care if he finds out!"

"B-b-but . . ." Sly had definitely heard this whole conversation. He'd been a part of it, the other day onstage, when Randi Jo had come on to him!

Randi Jo kept reading. "What is he going to do about it, anyway? I do what I want to do, and I love who I want to love!"

Sly gulped, his mind in total confusion. Those were the exact words Randi Jo had uttered when she had first fallen in love with him!

What in the world was going on here?

Chapter 11

"R_{andi Jo.}"

"Yes?"

"Uh, could we stop for just a minute?"

Randi Jo looked at him quizzically. "Sure. What's the matter, Sly?"

"Am I having déjà vu?" Sly asked. "Or have we had this conversation before?"

Randi Jo's face broke into a sly grin. "That depends," she said mysteriously.

"Depends? On what?"

"On whether that was you Friday inside the donkey mask."

"You mean . . ."

"I thought it was Neil Swensen, but then who-

ever it was took off running. I only saw the back of your head, but that *was* you, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, it was me," Sly said, shaking his head in amazement. "So you mean you were just saying those things because you thought you were rehearsing a scene?"

"Right. What did you—oh, Sly, you didn't think—"

"Of course not!" Sly said quickly. "Not at all. It's just . . . well . . ." He gave her a pleading look. "You won't tell anybody, will you?"

"Of course not," Randi Jo said, giving him a warm smile. "Oh, Sly, you silly thing!"

Sly's heart skipped a beat as he realized the horrible truth. If Randi Jo wasn't in love with him, that meant she was still in love with Matt—but Matt was in love with Sam!

Sly was back to square one, which meant Randi Jo's heart would soon be broken!

. . .

"Shhh, here he comes," Sam told Matt, putting a finger to her lips. Sure enough, Sly was walking down the aisle of the auditorium toward them, scowling as he looked at the two of them standing there together.

"All right, you know what to do," Matt said as Sly got within earshot. "I'll meet you after I finalize things with Randi Jo."

He went off, leaving Sam with Sly. Some of the

other actors were up onstage, rehearsing their scenes and taking directions from Mr. Murphy.

"What did Matt mean by, 'finalize things with Randi Jo'?" Sly asked Sam.

"I can't tell you," Sam said firmly. "Not yet. Anyway, I've got a bone to pick with you."

"You've got a bone to pick with *me*?" Sly repeated, pointing to himself in exaggerated amazement. "I've got a few choice things to say to you, too!"

"Not till you hear what I have to say first," Sam shot back.

"Quiet in the house!" Mr. Murphy called out in an irritated tone.

Sam indicated to Sly with a nod of her head that he should follow her, and she led him backstage and into one of the dressing rooms. Once he'd followed her inside, she shut the door behind him.

"Now," she said hotly, crossing her arms in front of her. "Let's get right down to it. Why did you steal my bottle of Love Potion Number Nine?"

"I only took it to save my friends," Sly replied, crossing his arms right back at her.

"What?" Sam cried, scrunching up her face. "What are you talking about?"

"Answer me this, Helen of Troy," Sly said sardonically. "Just where did you get your hands on that bottle?"

"Henry gave it to me as a good-bye present," Sam told him.

Sly stared at her, stunned. That was the last answer he'd expected. "Huh? I don't get it," he said. "Why would Henry give you something like that?"

"Maybe because he likes me a lot?" Sam suggested. "Or can you think of a better reason?"

"That doesn't make any sense!" Sly protested. "Why would your boyfriend give you a potion that would make other guys fall in love with you?"

Now it was Sam's turn to be startled. Was Sly kidding? If so, it was a weird moment for a joke. Then again, it fit right in with Sly's behavior over the last few weeks.

"Maybe," Sam replied, deciding to ignore Sly's lame attempt at humor, "he gave it to me because Henry trusts my feelings for him."

"But—but magic is magic!" Sly blurted out.

"Magic?" Sam echoed. "Sly, what in the world are you talking about?"

"As if you don't know!"

"I don't!"

"Yeah, right!"

"Look, why don't you just tell me, okay?" Sam asked. "Pretend I'm stupid, and I don't know anything about it."

"I don't know if I'm that good an actor," Sly grumbled. "But, okay, you want all the cards on the table, that's fine by me."

Sam sat down to listen. She had a feeling things would go better that way.

"First of all," Sly began, "I overheard you coming on to Matt. Oh, don't pretend you weren't—I checked to make sure it was you."

"I don't believe this!" Sam gasped. "Are you just making this up?"

"I heard you!" Sly insisted. "Just let me have my say before you start denying everything, okay?"

Sam shrugged hopelessly and let him rattle on.

"The next thing I know, I spot you pulling the same stunt with Jake."

"With Jake?!"

"And the amazing thing is, both him and Matt seem to be digging it!"

Sam's mind was racing back over the past few weeks, trying to figure out what Sly was referring to. But whatever it was, it escaped her totally.

"Could you be a little more specific?" she asked.

"Be happy to," Sly snapped back. "You were with Matt up in your room one evening and with Jake in a practice room the day after. Does that clear things up for you?"

Sam gasped in sudden understanding. Could it be . . . ?

"I couldn't figure it out, and nobody I told would believe me," Sly went on. "I asked myself where you were coming from, and that I did figure out pretty quickly. You were so upset over Henry leaving that you just went crazy over every guy you

knew. Hey, it happens. But in this case, you happened to be messing with *my* friends, and I knew if I didn't do something about it, Tiffani and Randi Jo were going to be very unhappy. Is any of this reaching you?"

"Well, I follow you . . .," Sam said tentatively.

"But none of that answered the question of how you were pulling it off," Sly resumed, pacing the room now and gesticulating like some great detective about to announce the identity of the murderer.

"So one afternoon, during practice, I snuck up into your room—and that's when I found the evidence."

Sam felt laughter rising up inside of her. It was all becoming clear to her now—the words of love with Matt and Jake, Sly's taking them seriously, not knowing about the play. . . .

Before she could stop herself, Sam started giggling. Seconds later she was totally out of control, laughing silently as tears streamed down her face.

"Did I say something funny?" Sly asked, becoming very irritated. "How about cluing me in?"

"Oh, Sly!" Sam moaned between laughs. "You have no idea!"

"I think I do," Sly insisted. "Yes, I very definitely think I do. I'm going to ignore your reaction. It's right in line with all the other weird behavior you've been exhibiting."

"I've been exhibiting weird behavior?" Sam repeated, aghast. "Me?"

"Yes, *you*," Sly kept on. "At least I was able to stop you before you sprayed anybody else!"

"So that's why you stole my perfume!" Sam said, and then lapsed into laughter again.

"I fail to see what is so funny," Sly said, squirming a little. "Anyway, I got Jake and Tiffani back together with a couple of well-timed sprays. But then I sprayed myself by accident, and Randi Jo happened to come by. For a while there, I was afraid she'd sniffed it and gone wild for me. Fortunately, she hadn't. Unfortunately, though, Matt's breaking up with her at this very moment."

"What?" Sam gasped, suddenly not laughing.

"Don't pretend you don't know about it!" Sly raged. "I heard you and Matt talking out there in front. He was about to go off and 'finalize' things with Randi Jo! You think I can't put two and two together?"

"Maybe I can't," Sam told him. "Why don't you add it up for me?"

"It adds up to Matt's dumping Randi Jo so he can go out with you!" Sly said.

"Sly," Sam said, trying to control her mirth. "Sit down. I guess I do have some explaining to do, and you don't want to be standing up when I do it."

Sly sat down, suddenly looking anxious and wary. "Okay," he said. "I'm listening. Just *try* to explain it all away."

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"Easy," Sam said cheerily. "Those 'words of love' between me and Matt—and between me and Jake—were just part of the script."

"The script?"

"Of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. We were reading audition scenes together!"

"Aud—audition scenes?" Sly repeated, swallowing loudly.

"Yes! Those guys and I are just friends. There was never anything between us!"

"There wasn't?"

"If you'd only asked me!" Sam said, regaining her composure.

"What about the potion?" Sly asked.

"Like I told you, it's just some perfume Henry got me as a going-away present."

"But I read the booklet that came with it!" Sly insisted. "It said it made the wearer irresistible to the opposite sex!"

"Haven't you ever read advertising copy before, Sly?"

"And your diary on the bed—it also said something about bewitching guys and making them fall in love."

"That was my audition scene as Puck! You haven't been around rehearsals enough yet, or you would have known. Puck squeezes the juice of this flower into the lovers' eyes, and it makes them each

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fall in love with the first person they see. In fact, it makes Randi Jo fall for you!"

"Huh?"

"Her character, I mean—Titania, the fairy queen. Of course, it's a real riot—"

"Oh, yeah?" Sly asked. "What's so funny about it?"

"Well, for one thing, she falls in love with you while you're wearing the donkey costume."

"The—the donkey costume?" Sly gasped. Everything was coming together now, and Sly saw the picture all too clearly. It was a picture of himself as the biggest fool this side of the Continental Divide!

"So there was nothing magical about the perfume Henry got you?" Sly asked, wincing with the pain of total knowledge.

"Nope. There was nothing special about it—except that it was incredibly expensive."

"It was?" Sly asked.

"Yes, and since you stole it and you broke it, I think it's only fair that you replace it."

"You do?"

"Yes, I do," Sam said definitively. "Don't worry. It'll only cost you about three hundred dollars..."

"Th-th-three..."

"Give or take a hundred."

"Oh, boy." Sly heaved a deep sigh. "Look, I'll

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get the money somewhere, somehow. I'll have time once I quit the show—"

"Quit the show?" Sam gasped. "Oh, no, you don't! Sly Winkle, you owe it to all your friends—especially to me—to hang in there and play the part."

"And make a total fool of myself?" Sly asked.

"Nothing could make you a bigger fool than you already are, Sly," Sam pointed out. "Besides, Jake is doing it, and he's a lot cooler than you are. If anyone's risking his reputation, it's him."

Sly had to chuckle at the thought of Jake in a dress. "I guess you're right," he said. "Of course, in that case, I won't have any time to earn money to replace your perfume."

"That's okay," Sam said, patting him on the shoulder. "Frankly, I don't want it."

"You don't?" Sly asked, not quite able to believe his good luck.

"No, I didn't like the scent that much, to tell you the truth," Sam admitted. "It was the fact that Henry gave it to me that made that particular bottle so special. And you couldn't replace that."

"Gee, Sam," Sly said, looking at the floor. "I'm sorry. I guess I messed up royally, huh?"

"It's okay, Sly," Sam assured him. "You were just trying to help your friends. And that's not foolish at all."

Sly felt a great weight being lifted from his

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shoulders. "But wait a minute!" he said suddenly. "What about Matt? He just went off to break up with Randi Jo, right?"

"No . . .," Sam said, shaking her head and smiling.

"Well, if they weren't finalizing their relationship, what were they finalizing?" Sly wanted to know.

At that moment, as if in answer to his question, Matt and Randi Jo burst into the room, followed by Jake, Tiffani, and Tony.

"Hey, Mr. Manager," Matt announced with a big grin on his face. "We've got good news. Thanks to Randi Jo, California Dreams has got a way cool gig!"

"A gig?" Sly repeated, his face spreading into a grin. "When? Where?"

"Well," Tiffani said, "you know how at the end of the play there's a wedding?"

"Yeah, so?" Sly prodded.

"Matt and I had this idea," Sam jumped in eagerly. "We could turn the wedding scene into a real party, with dancing—"

"—and California Dreams!" Matt finished.

"When they came to me with the idea, I thought it was fantastic," Randi Jo said. "And so did Mr. Murphy. It's been settled! After the play is over, there'll be a huge party in the gym featuring the Dreams."

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"Guys," Sly said, draping one arm around Matt and the other around Samantha, "that is, by far and away, the best news I've heard in about a million years."

Chapter 12

For the next two weeks, Sly Winkle was a man transformed. He was a human dynamo, leaving mere mortals wondering how he managed to accomplish everything.

He learned his lines in record time. Sly had been a little nervous about whether or not he'd be able to. But when he actually started going over them, he discovered that his lines were pretty much what he would have said in those circumstances, anyway. So it all came naturally and quickly.

Sly even began enjoying rehearsals, especially working with Jake. Once they realized that the other actors watching them thought they were funny—not foolish—both of them started to loosen up and play off each other with perfect timing.

Their excitement was infectious, and soon

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everybody in the cast and crew started feeling good about the show.

And Sly didn't stop there. He used all his managing skills to spread the word all over the school that everybody who's anybody had better be at opening night.

He participated in all the publicity events. One day, he wore a scarf and sunglasses and offered to sign autographs. When people wondered why, he'd launch into his spiel about the play.

The next day, he did a scene from the play in the cafeteria with Randi Jo—and he even wore the donkey costume for it! That piqued people's interest. Ms. Mahoney, the cafeteria aide, was about to send him to detention, until Randi Jo explained what they were doing and why.

The posters for the show had already been printed up—*A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM* written in big letters with ivy twisted all around it. There was an invitation below that to the party and dance afterward: *FEATURING CALIFORNIA DREAMS. COME ONE, COME ALL!* it read. Sly went around with a red felt-tip marker and circled that part on every poster in the school, so nobody could miss it. "Tactics," he explained to a stunned Randi Jo.

By the time opening night rolled around, the whole school was psyched, and the seven-hundred-seat auditorium was totally sold out. "Sly, you sure did an amazing job filling those seats," Matt told him

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as he peeked through the curtain before showtime. "Have you ever considered a career as a manager?"

"Thank you, Matthew," Sly said, accepting the compliment with his usual grace. "I might just do that."

Samantha walked past them, crossing the stage, her nails planted firmly between her teeth.

"What's the matter, Sam?" Matt asked her. "Nervous?"

"Nervous? Why? Do I look nervous? Oh, no, it shows! I knew it. I look like a wreck, and even worse, I can't remember any of my lines! I'm going to bomb out there, I just know it. I'm going to totally stink up the joint. Oh, good luck, you guys. You're both going to be awesome." She kissed them both on the cheek and wandered off, trying to remember something, *anything* she was supposed to say.

"What's happened to *her*?" Sly asked, shaking his head in bewilderment.

"I think it's called stage fright," Matt told his friend.

"Ridiculous," Sly said cockily. "Besides, Sam's been onstage lots of times with the Dreams."

"But that was different," Matt said. "She's a singer and a musician, not an actress."

Sly simply snorted. "Same thing," he intoned. "A performer is a performer, and an audience is an audience."

"I'm surprised you're not more scared yourself."

Sly," Matt said with a grin. "You've never performed in anything that I can remember."

"It's a gift," Sly said. "You either have it or you don't."

"I don't know," Matt said doubtfully. "That's a pretty big crowd and everyone we know is out there."

Sly shrugged, his interest aroused. "Let me have a look," he said to Matt, edging him aside so he could peek out the curtain.

"You sure you want to?" Matt asked.

"Why not?" Sly asked. "I'm doing fine. Nothing's going to—*whoa!*" The sight of the crowd out in the auditorium hit Sly like a right jab in the gut. Everything he'd eaten for dinner suddenly did a flip-flop in his stomach, and he broke out in a cold sweat.

"Sly?" Matt asked. "You okay, buddy?"

"I . . . uh . . . yeah . . ." Sly put a hand on his stomach to stop it from turning over. "Just have to sit down a minute. . . ."

He feebly walked over to a chair on the side of the stage and sat down. He was surprised to see Jake sitting right next to him. Jake didn't look too good, either.

"Break a leg, you guys," Randi Jo said from over their shoulders. She ran off quickly, back to the girls' dressing room.

"Break a leg?" Sly repeated, not sure how to take a remark like that.

"It means good luck, Wimple," Jake explained, his hand on his stomach and a distinctly greenish tint to his complexion.

Sly nodded slowly. "Good luck. Yeah. I'm gonna need it." He turned to Jake. "Did you see that crowd out there?" he asked.

"Why do you think I'm sitting here like this?" Jake replied.

"Oh," Sly said, nodding. "Well. I'm going to look like a horse's you-know-what."

"More like a donkey's," Jake corrected him. "Wimple, are you feeling sorry for yourself? Look at me! I've got to go out there in a curly blond wig and a dress!"

"Jake, you're hysterical as Thisbe," Sly assured him. "They're gonna laugh their heads off."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Jake said miserably. "My reputation is shot, man. This is it. Say good-bye to cool."

"I know what you mean," Sly sympathized.

Jake turned to him, frowning. "You do not know what I mean," he told Sly. "You have never been *cool*, Sly. So how could you know what I mean?"

"Forget it," Sly said with a sigh. There was no use arguing with Jake now.

But there was something Sly had to know. "Hey, Jake," he said. "At least I know why I'm doing this—to make it up to you guys for acting like such an idiot. But what's your excuse? Why would you go

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out there and put your reputation on the line like that?"

Jake straightened himself up slowly, struck by some private thought. "I'm doing this, Winkle," he said, "because no other guy in this whole school has the guts. Because they asked me to do it, and if I hadn't done it, there wouldn't be a show. You can't do the show without Thisbe. I'm going out there for the team. I'll see you onstage."

He got up and loped off. Sly watched him go. "Hey, Jake," he called after him. Jake turned around and looked at him. "You're not as bad as you think you are."

Jake smiled and gave Sly a wink. "Yeah, well, keep it to yourself," he said.

Just then, Lily Goodman, the stage manager, called, "Places, everyone."

Jake walked off to the men's dressing room to await his entrance. Sly got up and took a deep breath. Suddenly he didn't feel nauseous anymore. A feeling of challenge had taken over. If Jake could do it, so could he. He was going to go out there and do his best. Hey—he was Sly Winkle! His best had always been good enough before. And this time, he promised himself, it would be better than ever!

...

A Midsummer Night's Dream was a smashing success. The show began at a slow pace until the audi-

A California Night's Dream

ence started to grasp the complicated plot. And when Sly, Jake, and the rest of the workmen did their scene in the woods, the whole audience really started getting into it.

Sly had them in the palm of his hand, he could feel it. They loved him! Sly had to laugh—they thought he was such a great actor, when all he was doing was what he always did—connive, manipulate, and boss people around! Was he ever putting one over on them!

Of course, what the crowd liked watching best of all was Sly bossing Jake around and correcting his character's poor performance as "Thisbe." Jake and Sly really threw themselves into their parts. As good as they'd both been in rehearsal, they were twice as hysterical now!

Sam, as Puck, was pretty amazing, too. She couldn't remember any of her lines—but the audience never had a clue. She made them up on the spot! With her talent for talking, she was able to explain to the audience what she was up to without a stammer. And Sam was so cute that everyone fell in love with her. Sly shook his head, remembering how badly he'd misjudged her. She really was something! In fact, he thought, maybe he ought to ask her out one of these days. . . .

The wedding scene was the highlight of the entire show, with Sly's romantic hero, Pyramus, making kissees with Jake's blond-haired Thisbe.

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Everyone onstage and off was totally in hysterics. When it came time for the curtain call, half the people in the crowd were still drying their eyes between claps.

The players got a long standing ovation after Samantha's final speech, where she said the right lines for the first time the whole night. She begged the audience's pardon for any offense they might have taken at anything in the play and asked for their applause.

When the crowd finally quieted down, Mr. Murphy came onstage and said, "Thank you all for coming. We hope you enjoyed the show. But the night's not over yet!"

At this, a whoop went up from the audience. People started shouting "Party! Party!!"

"Yes, it's time to party!" Mr. Murphy continued. "And we invite you all to the gym for our 'wedding dance,' featuring PCH's favorite band, California Dreams!"

The audience headed for the auditorium exits, on their way to the gym. The actors went back to their dressing rooms to get changed for the dance.

Thirty minutes later, Sly entered the gym. To his shock and surprise, he was instantly surrounded by six lovely young ladies, each of whom wanted with all her heart to get next to him!

"Oh, Sly, you're so talented!" Melanie Babcock

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cooed, "And where did you get that cute cleft in your chin?"

"Hey, Sly," Lauren Winston whispered into his other ear. "I didn't know you had such a commanding presence!"

Sly, for once in his life, was speechless. He just smiled and nodded his acknowledgment. By the time he made his way up to the bandstand, Matt, Tony, and Tiffani were almost done setting up.

"Whoo! It's a jungle out there!" Sly said, regaining his power of speech. "Where are Sam and Jake?"

Tony exchanged high fives with Sly and then pointed to the far end of the gym. Sam was coming toward them, surrounded by four guys. Behind her came Jake with two girls vying for his attention.

"Hey!" Tiffani exclaimed. "What do those girls think they're doing?"

"Don't worry about it, Tiff," Tony said, "They're just starstruck."

Sam and Jake were doing their best to get across the gym floor and join the rest of the group on the bandstand. Finally, Sly was able to extend a hand to Jake and yank him up alongside.

"Hey, Winkle," Jake said, brushing himself off.

"Hey, Summers," Sly replied, nodding his head.

"I guess it worked out all right, huh?" Jake

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looked back over his shoulder at the girls who were still gazing at him.

"Just the way I planned it," Sly informed him.

"Sure, Winkle," Jake said with a sarcastic laugh. "Sure. Hey, it's okay. All's well that ends well."

"I've got news for you two," Sam broke in, sticking her head between them. "*All's Well That Ends Well* happens to be another play by Shakespeare."

"Yeah?" Jake responded. "Is that right?"

"Don't tell Randi Jo, okay?" Sly asked her. "Shakespeare is okay for a dead guy, but I've had enough of him for one lifetime. Know what I mean?"

Sam stared out at the crowd of girls waving and calling "Sly! Yoo-hoo!"

"I don't know," Sam said. "But something tells me you're going to change your mind about that before too long."

"Hey, you guys!" Tiffani interrupted. "I hate to break up the cast party, but it's time to rock 'n' roll!"

Tony beat out a riff on his drums, and the whole place started moving to the beat. The Dreams launched into one of their surefire rockers.

Sly watched from the side of the bandstand as his group did their thing. He felt on top of the world. Things had turned out great in the end. The band had their gig, he had babes dying to get his phone number, and his friends were back in love with the

A California Night's Dream

right people again. Even better, he and Jake had actually gotten along—they'd even become closer friends than they were before.

Yes, Sly thought happily. *It really was a California night's dream come true.*

Don't miss the next novel about

California Dreams

— the hottest band around!

Sly gets sidetracked by a beautiful girl while trying to land the Dreams a big gig. He goes after her and totally forgets about the band! Meanwhile, Tony's got his eyes on a new set of drums, but he'll have to get some more cash before he can buy these beauties.

Can Sly keep his eyes on the prize? Can Tony raise the cash without doing himself in?

Find out in the next
"California Dreams" novel.

A California Night's Dream



All the world's a stage, and Matt and Samantha are two of its coolest players. Especially when they land lead roles in the drama club's modern version of Shakespeare. But

when they start rehearsing, the sparks start flying, making Sly wonder if they still have time to rock with the band.

Meanwhile, Sam's sexy new perfume seems to be making the Dreams fall in love—with all the wrong people! First Matt and Sam fall for each other and then Sly and Randi Jo. This can't be for real!

Will rock 'n' roll take a back seat to the stage? Is Sam's perfume actually a secret love potion? Find out when you read *A California Night's Dream*, the new novel about California Dreams—the hottest band around!



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